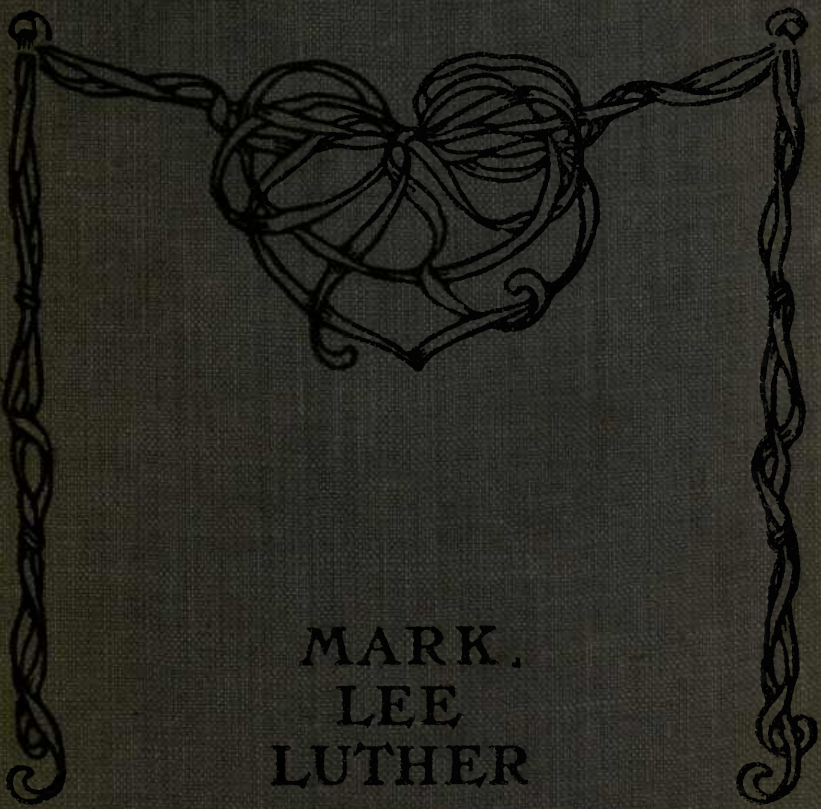
THE WOMAN OF IT



MARK. LEE LUTHER

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THE WOMAN OF IT

BY

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"THE CRUCIBLE" ETC.

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TO
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CHAPTER I

A WOMAN you ought to know sat watching the mild eddy of a hotel lobby in Washington. It was one of the smaller hotels—overgrown boarding-houses in reality—which cater to the more domestic members of the House of Representatives. The proprietor, according to his lights, had even made certain decorative attempts in keeping with the official character of his patrons. The Stars and Stripes topped the rear alcove where the clerks had their desk; steel engravings of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and the President in office hung here and there; and a stuffed eagle, presumably emblematic, perched jauntily above the telephone-booth. That national institution, the rocking-chair, was also in marked favor. There was rather too much red in the walls and rugs, and a too lavish use of electricity; but the effect as a whole was cheerful.

"I didn't suppose a hotel could look so home-

like, Fern," said the woman to the girl who shared her shy corner.

"I wish we knew somebody," replied Fern.

Both glanced wistfully toward the center of the lobby, where the thicket of rockers swayed sociably in pairs, trios, and quartettes. Nearly every chair held a woman. The men in most part lounged about the cigar-stand hard by the clerks' desk, smoking or plying toothpicks. None of them wore evening clothes, but a white waistcoat or two paid modest tribute to the amenities. One of the group so distinguished, a man with nervous hands, was telling a story. As he ended, another man, who had been restively awaiting his turn, capped the anecdote. This rival storyteller was of a florid type of good looks, dropping by night a full decade of his forty-five years, and bore the hallmark of commercial success.

"Papa seems to have plenty of friends," said Fern, watching the florid man. "I wonder what he's saying to them."

Olive Braisted smiled indulgently at her helpmate.

"Steve's telling them how I invented the relish, I expect. He never gets tired of bragging that I was the one who set things going. But I always say what I done was nothing; it took his brains to make Imperial Relish a household word all over the globe."

"It is pretty famous, isn't it? Did you notice

they had it printed on the bill of fare at dinner to-night?"

"Yes. I've got in the way of looking out for it. But," she added, shrewdly, "maybe they done that just to make up to your father. Ever since he was on in March to be sworn in they've known here at the Walden that we were coming."

"I expect father met a lot of these Congressmen then," speculated Fern, after another silence.

"Yes, he did, but he says he don't know their wives yet any better than we do."

Whereupon there befell a little incident which seemed to qualify this statement of the Hon. Stephen Braisted. From the elevator trailed a blond lady of generous though shapely outline, who, adjusting a gold lorgnon to her exceedingly blue eyes, swept the lobby and straightway rejected the society of the rocking-chairs for the masculine company about the cigar-stand. Olive Braisted, like every one keenly aware of this brilliant being's transit, thought her conduct bold, but was distracted from pointing a moral to Fern by the spectacle of her Stephen being greeted by this person as if he were a friend of long standing. She seemed on excellent terms with most of the men, in fact, and such as she did not know were at once presented by the story-telling gentleman with the nervous hands, whom Mrs. Braisted divined to be her husband. With this feminine invasion the group visibly prinked and plumed itself for higher things; cigars were held

at more conscious angles; the talk plainly grew gallant.

"Why do men always change so when a woman comes along?" Fern asked.

"I shouldn't say 'always,'" answered her mother, sagely. "It depends a lot on the woman. A plain body like me could plump in over there and never cause a ripple."

For perhaps the first time in her life the girl was prompted to compare her mother with other women. Then, in the same breath, the impulse struck her as disloyal, and with a quick movement she caught and pressed the nearest toil-worn hand.

"You're not really plain," she reassured, "and you're the best mother in the world."

Olive Braisted stirred a trifle shamefacedly under the public caress. However much she hungered for her daughter's affection, she would not have her effusive, though this was scarcely her word for the enormity. Her own term—and she fitted it instantly to the showy heroine of the cigar-stand comedy—was "gushing." Then, following some remark of Braisted's, she saw the lady glance graciously toward their corner and move forward in his company.

"Why, he's bringing her over!" whispered Fern, excitedly.

"Well, what of it?" demanded her mother, timidly flustered too, and vexed with herself because of it. "I'm sure we're as good as she is."

Stephen Braisted beamed over the introductions.

"Ollie," he said, "shake hands with Mrs. Congressman Estabrook of Brooklyn. And Mrs. Estabrook, here's my little girl, Fern. This is the kind of eighteen-year-olds we grow in the western part of our State."

"I've wanted to know you, dear Mrs. Braisted, ever since I met your delightful husband last spring," murmured the lady, and then, holding Fern a moment at arm's length, exclaimed: "The living image of my poor Marjorie. I must kiss you for her sake."

The pathos which she imparted to this speech deceived Olive.

"Did you lose her recently, ma'am?" she asked.

"Lose her?"

"I thought you meant she had passed away."

"Oh, dear no." She sank gracefully into a chair and arranged her soft draperies becomingly. "Marjorie is in a Boston finishing-school. We did discuss placing her somewhere here, but I decided that for real finish Washington was quite impossible."

"Fern is going to enter a school here tomorrow," stated Olive, bluntly.

"Really!" Mrs. Estabrook was unembarrassed. "I've no doubt that for a country girl it's the very thing."

Braisted, hovering vaguely over them during

these exchanges, now said: "I don't want to miss any of your husband's stories, Mrs. Estabrook," and, despite playful reproaches, deserted to the men.

Mrs. Estabrook followed his retreat with her lorgnon.

"I do admire a successful man," she avowed, turning. "You must be very proud of him, Mrs. Braisted."

Olive was indeed proud of him, even if her sense of fitness forbade frank confession; and, whether it were gush or not, the woman's praise of Steve was welcome.

"He deserves success," she said, warmly. "He worked hard for it."

"And he says he owes it all to you! When we met in March he told me that the idea of the famous relish was yours, and he mentioned it again to-night."

Mother and daughter exchanged a look of fond understanding, and Olive made her usual disclaimer.

"What I done was nothing," she insisted. "It needed his brains to build up the business. I never could have made the relish a household word."

"Do tell me about it," begged her auditor, amiably. "It must be a real romance."

"It is," agreed Olive. "Three years ago this time we were as poor as Job's turkey."

"Only three years!" said Mrs. Estabrook.

Yet, while her lips dropped sympathy, her brain queried how the possession of wealth could have wrought so little change in Braisted's wife. Her dress was dowdy; her hair was strained back with painful neatness; her hands were scarred and roughened by drudgery; her whole manner, like her speech, seemed to her critic provincial to an extreme.

"Steve and I both come of plain country stock," said Olive. "His grandparents, like mine, moved from New England to Tuscarora County, New York, when all that part of the State was just a wilderness. His folks settled near New Babylon—that's the county-seat—and mine a mile or so west of Etruria on the Ridge Road. Both of us went to the academy in New Babylon, and that's where we got acquainted and did our courting. I married young—too young, people would think nowadays—and started in housekeeping right away. Our place was near the lake, and as nice a piece of property as you could ask for. We hadn't money enough to buy it free and clear; but crops had been splendid for years, and we figured we could pay off the mortgage in no time. But we never did pay it off, though we lived there almost thirteen years. All our children were born on the farm, the two that's living and the three we buried. I always had a baby in my arms those days, but I didn't mind. We had to have a hired girl while I was on my back, and I enjoyed the rest."

"Dear me!" shrugged Mrs. Estabrook.

"Well, as I said," Olive went on, "we could never lift the mortgage, and it got so finally we couldn't even pay the interest. It was nip and tuck to keep bread in the children's mouths. By and by they foreclosed, and we moved over to a smaller farm, just outside Tuscarora Falls, where Steve planned to raise garden-truck for the townfolks. Things went better for a while. The children—that is, Fern and Steve Junior, who's in Yale College now—could attend good schools and once in a while hear a lecture or a play to improve their minds. Still, there was just a living in it, and Steve got restless and threw it up for a clerking job in town. It was a hardware-store where he worked, and we lived in a house about as big as a minute in a little back street near by. It wa'n't much of a house—or much of a job, for that matter—but we were happy. We all enjoyed being in town, and Steve had the promise of a raise when hard times let up. But hard times didn't let up, and Steve come down with typhoid fever. Oh, that was awful!"

"Sickness is always distressing." Mrs. Estabrook stifled a yawn and was caught at it by the girl.

Fern's mother saw nothing of this, however.

"But I won't go into that," she said, with a catch in her voice. "He didn't die, of course, but begun to pick up wonderful and hanker for his meals in a way he hadn't for a long time. It was

then, just to tempt Steve, that one day I made up a batch of the relish."

"Ah!" observed her listener, brightening in the hope of a speedy climax. "So that was how you invented it."

"No," replied Olive, with rigid accuracy; "it wa'n't. I really hit on the recipe when we run the truck-farm and I had everything in the pickle line handy. However, I made some of it now for Steve, and, as I sat watching him enjoy it, all of a sudden it popped in my head to take a sample to our grocer. I said nothing to the family; but that afternoon, when the dishes were washed, I slipped round the corner to the man we traded with most, because he trusted us most, and when the store was clear of customers I handed him my little glass jar. 'I want you to try that with your supper to-night, Mr. Rawlins,' I says. 'To-morrow, when I stop by, tell me honestly what you think about it.' Well, to cut a long story short, he liked it so much he was willing to sell it over his counter and allow me a good profit. And he done more. Although we owed him a lot, he trusted me for the stock of materials and for jelly tumblers to put the relish in. Then I went home and told Steve."

"He must have been delighted."

"Indeed he wa'n't. He didn't take to the idea at all, first off. It hurt his pride, I guess. But the debts were piling up, and he wa'n't

strong enough for store work yet, so he had to let me go ahead. I'll never forget how we got that first lot ready to sell. The whole family took a hand. Fern and I prepared the ingredients, Steve helped with the bottling, and S. J.—that's what we call Steve Junior—who was taking drawing lessons in school, printed the labels by hand. I was for calling it simply Braisted's Relish; but Steve said it was too good a thing for a meek name like that, and insisted on adding 'imperial,' and Braisted's Imperial Relish it has stayed. The end of the story you've probably heard, for the papers printed some of the facts during Steve's campaign. When it begun to take, which was right off, Steve designed a special jar, hired help and factory-room, and reached out for trade. It was then we chose the label you see everywhere. I made Steve get photographed special for it, and it turned out the best likeness he'd ever had. Well, as I started to say, he put a drummer on the road, and when orders begun to come in from a hundred and two hundred miles off I knew the battle was won, though naturally I couldn't guess how big a success it would grow to be. Still, it's only fair to say that our brand was known all over western New York before a New York capitalist got a taste of it in a Rochester restaurant and sent for Steve and offered to back the business on a big scale. Advertising done the rest. The plant that begun with Steve

and S. J. and Fern and me now employs hundreds of hands and even ships the relish to India."

"How interesting!" Mrs. Estabrook roused briskly. "It's meant a tremendous change for you, of course."

"Not so much till lately. At first it was enough for me to know we were out of debt and putting something by. After a while we built a house in Tuscarora Falls and furnished it as we'd always talked of furnishing a home. That was a treat."

"It must have been."

"Yes," said the older woman, musingly, "it was the kind of thing I'd reckoned I might sometime see in Heaven, where, according to Scripture, there'll be many mansions to pick from; but I certainly never did expect such a blessing down here. In fact, if it isn't a sin to say so, I don't see how we could possibly get more satisfaction out of one of those ready-made houses in the skies than Steve and I got from the place we built in Tuscarora to suit ourselves."

"What style of house did you decide upon?"

"White paint and green blinds," said Olive. "I don't think anything can be nicer if it's kept fresh."

"She means the kind of architecture, momma," interpreted Fern, blushing.

Olive laughed.

"It started out to be colonial," she explained, "but Steve and I thought of so many bow-windows and porches and cupolas we wanted that the man said he'd defy anybody to tell what style it ended. He seemed put out about it, somehow; but it suited us. What we were after was solid comfort, and we certainly got it. Hot and cold water everywhere, gas and electric light, two bath-rooms, and *such* a kitchen! Why, the kitchen beats most parlors."

Mrs. Estabrook shuddered mentally to fancy what the furnishings of this architectural nightmare might be, and changed the subject.

"You didn't care to travel?" she asked.

"I didn't myself. It was happiness enough for me to realize that the roof over our heads wa'n't mortgaged, and that there was help in the kitchen to do the drudgery. Steve traveled, though. The business took him all over the United States, and he saw before I did that it wa'n't right for us to stick always in Tuscarora County. It wa'n't fair to the children. By and by he begun to mix in politics. It was the business again that led him into it; but he come to like having a hand in things, and, first thing I knew, our old member of Congress died very sudden and Steve was running for office at the special election. Well, they can't do enough for him out our way—they say it was the Braisted Relish that put Tuscarora Falls on the map—so here we are."

Mrs. Estabrook saw her chance and rose.

"Out in the world at last!" she exclaimed, dramatically. "You'll adore Washington."

"I don't feel so lost here as I did in New York when we come east. It's more quiet and homelike. Then, there seems to be considerable many country people in the Walden."

"Yes?" The restless lorgnon reviewed the lobby with an air which the silent Fern thought signified "Too many." But Mrs. Estabrook contented herself with saying, "More than I supposed," and with a brief good night floated across the rug-littered mosaic to rejoin her husband, who at this moment was entering the elevator.

This was not the final impression, however, which she made that night upon her new acquaintance. It happened that Olive, herself shortly ascending, discovered on reaching her landing that she had left her key below stairs. She had sent Fern to fetch it, and stood waiting beside her own door when the sound of a woman's yawn came to her over the transom of the room across the corridor.

"So that's what you make of Stephen Braisted's family?" commented a man's voice.

The woman of the yawn gave a cry expressive of utter fatigue.

"It did bore me—frightfully," she said. "I told you it would. I dare say there are possibilities in the daughter with the silly name;

but Ollie, as the relish-maker calls her, is hopeless. Why should I bother my head about her?"

"On general principles, Ada."

"Is Braisted so important?"

The scratch of a match and the odor of a cigar drifted over the transom before Estabrook answered:

"Any man with Braisted's pile is important."

"I suppose you've something up your sleeve, Dan?"

"No." His tone was listless. "My sleeve is as empty as my pocket."

There was a little pause. Then, with another yawn, the woman retorted:

"Oh, well—keep the scheme to yourself if you prefer. I only hope it will pay. You'll have to make something pay soon."

CHAPTER II

OLIVE endured a quarter-hour of acute regret that she had bared her heart to such callous eyes; but, perceiving the humor of her discovery, her chagrin lost itself in curiosity, and she lingered over her bed-going in the hope that Steve would return and tell her more about the Estabrooks; but Braisted tarried late, and she fell asleep. In the small hours she was drowsily aware that her husband had come in redolent of tobacco and cloves; but she dropped off again without questioning him. The morning had its own absorbing interest: Fern was to leave her.

After she dressed she went softly into her daughter's room. The girl still slept, and for a long moment the mother bent over her with a painful tightening of the throat. Fern looked wonderfully fresh and winsome as she lay among her pillows, her face, smiling and delicately flushing in some dream, framed in the chestnut splendor of her hair. She was nearer nineteen than the age her father had specified; but Olive thought of her as a baby still, and now, stooping as she was wont above her childish crib, she kissed an outflung dimpled arm and then started guiltily back as the sleeper stirred.

"It's high time you got up," she said, in a matter-of-fact tone. "You know this is the great day."

Fern burrowed deeper into her pillows.

"Let me finish it," she begged.

Her mother briskly raised a window-shade and flooded the room with morning sun.

"Finish what?"

The girl opened her eyes lazily, and, meeting the light, quickly shut them up again with a little pout, half smile, which had ravished Olive's heart from the cradle. She secretly thought Fern's eyes the loveliest things on earth. They were gray like Steve's, but had a softness which his lacked, while any beauty might have coveted her lashes. She reconnoitered a moment now from behind their silken barrier.

"Did you speak, momma?"

"You said you wanted to finish something, and I asked you what?"

Fern began to laugh.

"Then I was talking about my dream. It was such a silly dream. I thought I was at the White House, and when I came to the President he had Ben Halsey's face. I was so surprised I cried out, 'Why, I thought you were my father's secretary?' Then he bowed very low and kissed my hand and asked me to receive with him."

"That *was* a tomfool performance," commented Olive, wondering whether anything in particular had set Fern's thoughts running on young

Halsey. "Now be spry. It's almost time for breakfast."

"But you don't have to march in the minute the head waiter opens the doors. I wish I could board here instead of at the school. I'd just make you lie abed sometimes."

Olive shook her head.

"No, you wouldn't," she declared. "I was brought up to rise early, and I don't mean to lose the habit while I enjoy my health. I do wish you could board here; but you wouldn't get as much out of your school. It will seem queer not to have you by me nights where I can run in and see that you keep the covers around your shoulders."

The lump leaped back in her throat as she pictured this deprivation, and she made a bustle of packing till her self-control returned.

As the family went down to breakfast Braisted's eye fell on a notice posted in the elevator.

"'The official ladies will meet in the red parlor at two o'clock,'" he read aloud. "This means you, Ollie."

His wife eyed the announcement with misgiving.

"Do I have to go?" she asked.

"Sure," he said, jocosely. "They'll have you up for contempt of court if you don't."

"I'd go if I were in your place," advised Fern, as they passed into the dining-room and strained to achieve a dignity befitting the negro head

waiter's escort. "You'll probably get to know them all right away, and, besides, it will be something for you to do after you take me over to the school."

"I find I can't go with you, by the way," put in her father, shuffling his morning mail with the air of a man overwhelmed with vast affairs. "Some of the up-State members are going to get together this forenoon, and I promised to be on hand. Anyhow, Ollie," he argued, defensively, seeing his wife's disappointment, "it's mainly a woman's business. I ordered you a carriage for half-past ten."

Breakfast became rather a dismal affair after that, for Olive had all along counted on his managing head to see the matter through. She and Fern trifled with the food and avoided each other's eyes; but Braisted, as was his wont, isolated himself behind his newspaper and stoked away great quantities of fruit, cereal, rolls, coffee, chops, and griddle-cakes against the labors of the day. This trencherman's feat had become as habitual with him as the sluggish torpor which for two hours would deprive him of what he called his head for business. Yet he never blamed his breakfast. He had eaten valiantly when he toiled with his hands, and saw no reason why he should stint himself now that he could well afford a full plate.

About the time Braisted's brain began to clear, his wife and daughter set out; and the ride

in the morning air, autumnal in its mildness, although December had begun, soon put them in brighter spirits than they had known since waking. Their driver, an aged negro, beguiled the way with disjointed scraps of local history and gossip of the great. Fern's gray eyes regarded him with reverent awe when he imparted the statement that he was born a slave on the Mount Vernon estate; but doubt crept in as, stimulated by her interest, he unfolded the tale of his intimacy with virtually every President from Washington down. Pinned to dates, he had the hardihood to declare himself a hundred and ten years old if he was a day, whereupon she sadly left off delving into the past and held him strictly to the present era. It was all one to the negro, who dilated with equal unction upon the latter-day aristocracy of wealth which was crowding the aristocracy of birth to the wall. In one instance, an old Washingtonian had by some miracle contrived to rear a fortune and a house which vied bravely with the palaces of the money-kings who had begun to affect the Capital winters. The Braisteds were to hear more of this structure; but now it merely labeled itself as the Colburn place, and took rank with the other costly houses which by the driver's account were one and all marvels of beauty and luxury.

After a diverting half-hour they reached the remodeled mansion of gray stone which housed

the school. It was an impressive, castellated edifice, a little withdrawn from a fashionable avenue, among fine old trees and well-ordered shrubbery which still retained their yellow and scarlet livery.

"I didn't dream it was so high and mighty," whispered Fern, as they drove under a porte-cochère resembling a feudal drawbridge. "The photographs didn't look anything like this."

"Maybe we hadn't ought to have arranged everything by mail," said her mother, with misgiving. "I wish Steve hadn't been so brash in sending on the check."

"But I like it," reassured the girl, "and I'm sure it's fine. Everybody has heard of Beauchamp Manor."

They were conducted to a large hall where Olive, hunting vainly for the visiting-cards she could never remember to carry, was vaguely aware of the presence of many strange objects and of an ecclesiastical light filtering from stained glass.

"Just say it's Mrs. Braisted and her daughter who's coming here to school," she told the servant, giving up the search.

"Miss Abercrombie will think we're green," deprecated Fern, on the man's noiseless departure.

"Well, we are," retorted Olive. "But wouldn't this Miss What's-her-name feel just as green on a farm out our way?"

Only a daring imagination could figure the personage who now entered as an adjunct of a rural landscape. The necessity of posing as a model of deportment to fourscore young ladies had transformed the unfortunate woman into a thing of clockwork whose every smile, word, or gesture was mechanical. She held herself in the manner which court painters would have us believe characterized Queen Elizabeth, and her way of shaking hands had all the rigidity to be expected of such a bearing. Extending her own hand at the normal level, Olive was amazed to find herself grasping nothing at all, and to discover in the same instant that Miss Abercrombie's fingers, crooked at a precise angle to her wrist, were dangling just beneath her chin. She succeeded in seizing the cold member at the second shot and gave way to Fern, who, profiting by her mother's misadventure, effected a good imitation of the lady's own performance.

"The pictures in the catalogue don't favor Beauchamp Manor," observed Olive, to relieve the awkwardness of this encounter.

Miss Abercrombie's already well-arched brows rose higher, her set smile widened by a fraction —no vulgar fraction—till, abetted by the brows, it expressed a god-like tolerance of human error.

"Beecham, please," she requested, sadly. "We follow the English."

Mrs. Braisted turned a puzzled face upon her.

"How?" she asked, wondering if her hearing were failing.

"I refer to the pronunciation of Beauchamp Manor. We use the English rendering—Beecham."

Olive felt that this was not only hifalutin, but in some way a betrayal of the principles of 1776; but she deferred meekly to authority seated in so august a shape.

"I presume I can remember it by the pills," she said. "I'm real sorry that my husband, who done all the corresponding about Fern's entering Bowsham—I mean Bee-champ Manor, couldn't come with us; but you know," she went on, with a little thrill of pride in Steve's official status, "a Congressman has no end of calls on his time."

"So I understand," returned Miss Abercrombie, as if Congressmen were a species of fauna with which one could scarcely expect a gentlewoman to be familiar. "However, Mr. Braisted's letters were explicit. His words—I am sure I quote him exactly—his words were, 'Whatever it costs, my daughter must have the best.' Am I right?"

Steve's wife was not sure that he had splurged to this extent; but it sounded like him, and she made no qualifications.

"The best, of course," she agreed. "I only wish Fern could have entered when your fall term begun; but the rest of us wa'n't ready to come on."

"Our curriculum is so elastic that a girl may enter any time," assured the preceptress, lightly, but, as if taking prudent thought, at once added: "Though, of course, the great expense entailed by such an establishment as this compels us to refuse any reduction from the full-term price. Whatever her preparation, Miss Braisted will have no difficulty in fitting immediately into place. As I say, our curriculum is elastic."

Olive wondered whether "immejiately" were, like Beecham, a British importation; and she was not at all sure what an elastic curriculum might be, though she had read the costly catalogue of Beauchamp Manor with care.

"Well, anyhow," she ventured, "I do hope you see that the girls stand straight and keep their feet dry."

Miss Abercrombie's smile invited implicit confidence.

"Our medical director is most vigilant," she answered. "Then, too, we offer special courses in hygiene which are simply invaluable. A Beauchamp Manor girl may be singled out anywhere by her fine carriage. But let me show you through. This apartment where we stand we call the Hall, and an attempt has been made to attune the furnishings to its Tudor character. It serves the double purpose of a living-room and, when occasion demands, of a more formal background for the practice of the graceful

amenities. We aim to accustom our young ladies in their daily life to refined and beautiful surroundings, and to the usages of good society."

As she passed the room in hurried review, Olive found her early impression of its foreignness intensified. Much of the furniture reminded her of a section of a museum in New York she had hastily visited and seemed almost ecclesiastical in design, while the same religious—she was half inclined to say popish—tendency characterized many of the paintings, emaciated saints and madonnas being particularly numerous. Such pictures and sculpture as did not fall within this category went to a pagan extreme which, to her thinking, was little short of scandalous. Perhaps in a museum they might, like the furniture, have their curious place, but in a girls' school—

Miss Abercrombie, following her fascinated gaze, paused an instant before one of the arch-offenders.

"What superb modeling!" she said. "What poetry! What feeling! As you see, Mrs. Braisted, the fine arts are meat and drink to us. As with the Greeks, they permeate and color our lives. We aim to present our pupils on every hand with reminders of the sublime and the beautiful."

The rest of the building was only less pretentious. The corridors, the chapel, the studies, the gymnasium, the assembly-room, where four-

score smiling girls eyed the newcomer with interest, all bore evidence of lavish expenditure, and, true to prediction, preached the sublime and the beautiful at every turn. But Fern's own room, her mother was relieved to perceive, was quite free of these plump sinners and ill-fed saints.

The principal misread her glance at the bare walls.

"We leave the decoration of the bedrooms to individual taste," she explained. "For example," she threw open the door of a neighboring room, "here is what the daughter of one of the wealthiest men in America prefers."

They glanced in at a cell of such monastic simplicity as made Fern's room seem luxurious. An iron bed, two common chairs, a pine table, and a shelf of books were its sole furnishings.

"And the daughter of ex-Senator Blount," said Miss Abercrombie, impressively.

"What!" cried Fern, who read the ten-cent magazines, "Marshall Blount—the asphalt-king?"

"I believe the sensational press does give him some such extravagant title. His daughter, as you may imagine, has a mind of her own. She requested this simplicity. Her home has wearied her of display."

Olive's sympathy went out to the child of millions.

"I'm glad you'll be so near her, Fern," she said. "She must have a strong character."

As they turned away Philippa Blount herself came upon them. Dark, slender, proud of carriage, she bent a level look upon the principal, which told plainly that she was aware that her room had been exhibited as a curiosity. With a flush tinting her high cheek-bones Miss Abercrombie presented the Braisteds. The girl greeted them with a simple directness that had its charm, and, on learning that Fern was to room across the corridor, gave the new-comer a non-committal smile and bade her be neighborly. She was entering her own room when the name Braisted again passed Miss Abercrombie's lips.

"Is this Mrs. Stephen Braisted?" she asked, turning with a marked change of manner. "Mrs. Stephen Braisted of Tuscarora Falls?"

Olive had a sudden heady sense of the meaning of fame.

"I guess you've heard of the relish," she smiled.

For an instant the girl looked baffled.

"Oh yes," she returned, smiling too. "Everybody has heard of it, of course. But what I started to say was that we have a friend in common. I mean Mr. Halsey."

"Ben!" cried Fern. "Our Ben Halsey?"

"Yes. I knew he was coming back to Washington with Mr. Braisted, and I am very glad to meet his friends."

Olive was dumfounded to find Steve's secretary on such terms with this regal daughter of

Marshall Blount. Indeed, Miss Abercrombie herself burned with a vulgar curiosity, which, as a model of deportment, she could scarcely gratify. Then the strange girl vanished into her strange room, leaving the mystery unsolved.

Miss Abercrombie considerately left them at Fern's door; and Olive faced the actual parting, which, trying enough in itself since it was their first, now took on added poignancy from her doubt whether they had chosen wisely. She put off the inevitable as long as she could, answering Fern's excited chatter after its kind and making a show of helping her unpack. Suddenly, however, she flung pretense aside, and, shaking with sobs, gathered the rather mystified girl into her arms.

"I suppose I'm an old fool," she said, presently smiling through her tears. "Any other woman would be delighted to leave her daughter in such a place. You'll learn everything a lady had ought to know."

Fern brushed away one or two sympathetic tear-drops from her own soft cheek and hailed the cheerier outlook.

"I think it's grand," she declared.

"Don't let the grandness make you homesick."

"Of course I won't. How can I possibly be homesick when I know you and father are just down at the Walden?"

"Besides, it's only a few weeks to Christmas," Olive reminded, more for her own comfort than to hearten Fern. "We'll be together, S. J. and all."

She steeled herself to a calm good-by; but she passed out under Miss Abercrombie's feudal drawbridge with a feeling of irrevocable loss.

CHAPTER III

AT luncheon Steve poohpoohed her doubts. "Of course it's the right place for her," he said, easily. "I was kept so on the jump when I was here in the spring that I couldn't properly look it over for myself; but I did ask questions, and everybody told me there wasn't a school in the city that could touch it for equipment. And it costs more than any other! I guess that shows pretty well where it stands."

"I wish it wa'n't quite so showy," returned his wife. "It seems almost like a castle."

"No castle's too good for Fern. Drop the penny-saving, Ollie. We're quit of scrimping, thank God! Cut loose and enjoy life. That's going to be my motto from now on. If I hadn't promised to meet a fellow at the New Willard, I'd carry you off to a matinée. What say you go by yourself?"

"I've some mending to do."

"There you go again," he jeered. "As if the hotel wa'n't full of colored girls you could hire."

"It wouldn't be done right."

"Oh, well," he laughed, "suit yourself. I've got to run now."

She lingered at table, dreading to face the loneliness of her rooms. The grotesque ways of the negro waiters diverted her, for they were unlike such colored folk as she had known. The negro of her acquaintance was a sober being of varying industry, little different save in skin from the predominant white. These, on the contrary, seemed like great black children confronting life with an eternal smile. She was sure that the gigantic head waiter, who ruled his little kingdom with autocratic hand, must descend from some kidnapped jungle king. Few people were lunching at this hour, however, and it came to her abruptly that the eyes of the idle regiment were mainly fixed upon herself. As she went out she perceived Mrs. Estabrook and her husband in a far corner and remembered that she had meant to ask Steve precisely who they were.

On entering the elevator her eye once more met the notice summoning the "official" ladies to the red parlor at two o'clock, and instead of ascending she turned and sought the place of meeting. What had earlier seemed a disagreeable duty, now presented itself as a welcome refuge from her thoughts. The sliding doors of the red parlor, so called to distinguish it from varieties in blue, yellow, and green, were closed save for a narrow aperture into which one or two ladies ahead of her now edged with a bearing patently worn to impress the unofficial by-

standers. Squeezing in turn through this opening, Olive found herself in an atmosphere of great solemnity, such conversation as there was being conducted in whispers. After a moment's hesitation she sought a sofa in a retired corner, where sat a gray-haired old lady whose face she had already remarked and liked. She greeted Olive with a friendly nod as she sat down, and bent toward her with an air of humorous confidence.

"Which were you looking for as you came in," she asked, "the casket or the goat?"

Olive smiled back comprehendingly.

"It does look pretty glum," she agreed.

"I should say it does. They act as if it were a lodge initiation or a funeral. You're Mrs. Braisted, aren't you?"

"Yes; from New York State."

"I'm Mrs. Tully, from Maine," announced the old lady. "Our State has been in the habit of sending my husband back term after term, so Washington is an old story to me. I can see you don't like it much yet; but you will. It's the funniest place on earth."

The guarded opening continued to admit self-conscious women till the company numbered over a score. As each entered, Olive's sprightly seat-mate would murmur "Kansas," "Texas," "California," "Kentucky," "Ohio," or some other commonwealth.

"Do you know everybody?" Olive exclaimed.

Mrs. Tully's eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Indeed I don't," she chuckled. "Two-thirds of them never lived at the Walden before. Nine times out of ten, though, I can guess their State. I was sure you were from western New York before I was told who you were. Now take that bean-pole of a woman just coming in! Hot bread and fried chicken have written 'Mississippi' all over her sallow face just as plainly as mine spells salt codfish, mince-pie, and Maine."

Olive hardly knew whether to take her in jest or in earnest; but she entered into the game with zest.

"How about those?" she asked, as two matrons of ampler lines with difficulty negotiated the passage.

"Pennsylvania," classified Mrs. Tully. "The tall one hails from near Philadelphia, and the other from near Pittsburgh. I know by their accent, for I overheard them talking millinery in the hall outside the door. But try it for yourself. Where do you place the blond person with the quizzing-glass, who has just posed herself so successfully on the piano-stool?"

"But I know Mrs. Estabrook," Olive answered. "I'll have to try another."

"Oh," said her companion, as if reining up shortly from pungent comment. "I thought I'd start you off with something easy. Of course, her clothes could only come from Fifth Avenue."

Mrs. Estabrook's choice of the piano-stool was, beyond doubt, deliberate. In fact, a chair was offered her; but she waved it aside for the uncertain perch before the instrument whose mahogany made so effective a background for her elaborately tailored costume. She wore a hat, and, the balmy weather notwithstanding, furs, and her air was that of one who tarried for a moment only on her way to more important affairs.

"That brown broadcloth fits her like a sheath," observed Mrs. Tully. "I wonder who makes her clothes."

Judging by eyes, the whole assemblage was busy with this query. Then a sharp-featured woman in the bow-window seemed with a start to recall that the real purpose of the gathering was not to inventory Mrs. Estabrook's wardrobe; and, tapping a convenient jardinière with her pencil to draw the hypnotized public attention to herself, she began to explain for those new to Washington that in most hotels where a number of Representatives resided the official ladies found some measure of coöperation a social necessity. As wives or daughters of men in public life, certain things were expected of them which ladies not exposed to the limelight could and often did neglect. The etiquette of Washington was unique.

"In the United States," suggested Mrs. Estabrook, sweetly.

The chairwoman greeted this amendment with a chilling stare.

"In the United States, of course," she assented, primly. "I have no personal knowledge of foreign courts." For the moment she lost the thread of her theme. "Where was I?" she broke off, reddening.

Olive's sofa quivered from a heroic effort for self-control on the part of the mirthful Mrs. Tully.

"Mrs. Pratt there," she explained, under cover of the volley of promptings which met the flustered leader's appeal—"Mrs. Pratt thinks that nobody knows the ropes like herself. Her husband is just beginning his tenth term."

Questioned by an eager little woman who confessed that she had never been east of the Rockies before, the social arbiter now launched into a dissertation on the proper conduct of life at the Capital, which, so expounded, seemed to Olive to consist mainly of an insane waste of calling-cards. Eighteen winters in Washington had developed mighty powers of endurance in Mrs. Pratt, for she mentioned with pride that she had more than once accomplished forty calls in an afternoon. Every day in the week, it appeared, had its peculiar place in this exacting rite. Monday was sacred to the Supreme Court; on Tuesday the Representatives received; Wednesday was set apart to the Vice-President and the Cabinet; Thursday was

given over to the Senators; while the remainder of the week, not excepting the nominal day of rest, was monopolized by the permanent Washingtonians. A lady in the Cabinet group, so the speaker asserted, would in a single afternoon number her callers by hundreds. Yet, after all this extravagant outlay of energy and pasteboard, these laborers in a sterile vineyard apparently gained little save pasteboard in return.

As she listened Olive asked herself whether this was the way she would choose to spend her hard-won leisure, and promptly decided that it was not. Let these devotees of Red Tape do as they would; she would have none of it. But it forthwith developed that she could not wholly divorce herself from the scheme of things. It was stated as axiomatic, and received like an utterance thundered from Sinai, that a call upon the First Lady of the Land was incumbent upon every one of them, while it was with equal emphasis made clear that to do themselves credit the official ladies of the Walden must pull together.

"Let us strive to maintain the traditions of the House," exhorted Mrs. Pratt. "Let us respect the customs of this especial roof. It has always been our habit to receive on the second Tuesday of the month, and I think I may say without fear of contradiction that no Representative receptions are more popular. The Walden management always gives us the ex-

clusive use of the drawing-rooms, which, as you will have noticed, can be thrown together, and allows Garfield, the head-waiter, to announce our guests. One of the hall-boys is assigned to look after the baskets."

"Some of the ladies may not understand the latter allusion," contributed Mrs. Estabrook, at this point.

The social arbiter made no concealment of her impatience at a second interruption from this source.

"What won't they understand?" she demanded, tartly.

"The precise function of the—baskets."

Mrs. Pratt smiled pityingly.

"The baskets," she vouchsafed, as if the explanation of such an elementary matter were an imposition—"the baskets hold the cards. They are arranged on a table which we place at the entrance of the lobby. As the callers pass they drop their cards into such of these receptacles as they wish. Each, naturally, bears its owner's name. The baskets may be of any tasteful pattern—some tie them prettily with ribbon—and, as we are always a numerous family here at the Walden, the display is usually a varied one. I trust I have made it quite clear to you, Mrs.—er—Estabrook?"

"Oh, quite," rejoined that lady. "I have seen the exhibition myself, and was only anxious that the others should receive a graphic conception.

I am sure they will have no difficulty in seeing how much the silly tableful resembles a bargain-counter."

The bomb dropped into the conference so swiftly that it was not at once evident that it was a bomb; but the curdled smile which the chairwoman turned on the presumptuous critic of the piano-stool soon cleared any doubt. Here was temerity indeed!

"Perhaps you can suggest a substitute?" she snapped. "Washington will be heavily in your debt."

"I've no doubt I could," replied Mrs. Estabrook, tranquilly. "But with that I have no concern. I use the baskets simply as an illustration of the absurdity of the existing plan whereby all the ladies receive together."

The indignant Mrs. Pratt opened her lips for a crushing rebuke, but, finding her powers of expression inadequate, shut them up again in a grim, straight line.

Mrs. Estabrook beheld her frown unmoved.

"Obviously," she continued, "we can't expect to do things in a hotel as we would in our respective salons, if I may use a word which somehow suggests the individuality of the hostess. But, on the other hand, need we rush to the other extreme? Think of it for a moment! Five-and-twenty hostesses in a single drawing-room! What would Mme. Récamier or Mme. de Sévigné say to that? What chance would even

they have had amid such a regiment? Now I suggest that, instead of receiving once a month en masse, we divide ourselves into four groups and receive weekly."

A long silence followed till Mrs. Pratt, recollecting herself, asked if Mrs. Estabrook meant to offer this as a formal motion.

"Certainly, if it is necessary to be formal."

"The chair does deem it necessary," ruled the social arbiter, heedless of the fact that nobody had asked her to become a chair or any other article of furniture. "Do I hear a second?"

Another silence fell, during which Mrs. Estabrook's color rose. Finally Olive's seat-mate volunteered.

"I second the motion as a matter of courtesy," she said. "I don't bind myself to vote for it."

Mrs. Pratt assumed a front of spartan impartiality.

"It has been moved and seconded," she announced, in parliamentary tones, "that, instead of following the time-honored tradition of the Walden as to receptions, we divide ourselves into four groups, one of which shall receive every week. By this innovation, let me add, the expense incurred will, of course, fall on six ladies instead of twenty-five. All in favor of the change raise the right hand."

Mrs. Estabrook's neat glove fluttered in air, a lonely minority of one.

"Opposed?" called the autocrat, crisply, and

then, with unchairman-like triumph at the thicket of hands: "The noes have it by a practically unanimous vote."

The issue came so quickly to the test that Olive voted with neither side; but, in spite of last night's duplicity, she felt rather sorry for the woman on the piano-stool. So far as she could make out, Mrs. Estabrook was as safe a guide for these mysterious waters as the unengaging Mrs. Pratt.

"I suppose Mrs. Estabrook has lived here a long time, too?" she remarked to her new friend as the meeting broke up.

Mrs. Tully gave a little cluck of surprise.

"But you said you knew her!"

"I meant I'd met her. It was only last night."

"Then you've missed half the joke. The Estabrooks have come to the Walden to save money. He's a lame duck—defeated for reelection, you know. They've always lived at one of the fashionable hotels before. Now you see what sticks in Harriet Pratt's throat."

Olive left the red parlor depressed.

"I don't take much to all this calling," she owned, uneasily.

"Oh, you'll soon see the funny side of that, too," reassured Mrs. Tully, buoyantly. "I'd advise you to start in right away. Everybody works hard at it in December. Only the White House is exempt."

Reminded again of the most formidable call of all, Olive wanted to ask just how one should go about it to pay one's respects to the wife of the President of the United States; but her companion's ever-dancing eye deterred her. She was shy of exposing her ignorance to one so prone to see everything in a spirit of jest.

CHAPTER IV

ALL the next day, which was Sunday, Olive was tormented by the thought of this imperative social duty. She took it for granted that Steve would know nothing of these matters; besides, he could think or talk of nothing except the opening of Congress on the morrow. The fear lest she appear ridiculous, which had kept her from advising with Mrs. Tully, also dissuaded her from an appeal to the vinegar-faced autocrat of the red parlor; she would set Stephen Braisted's wife down for a ninny. It did occur to her that Ben Halsey might be of use, for he had spent a winter in Washington as secretary to Braisted's predecessor. She did not mind asking Ben. This manly, wholesome young chap, from a neighboring town in Tuscarora County, had enlisted her sympathies in more ways than one; but her heart warmed to him specially, because she divined that he was in love with Fern.

But Ben's ideas of Washington social usages were vague.

"You see the old member from Tuscarora was a bachelor," he told her. "He never went

in for society. He used to say he'd noticed that it was the men who passed the balls that passed the bills."

"But didn't you take any interest in such things?"

"Not a bit," he laughed. "I hadn't the time. You know I attended law-school in my spare hours. Whenever I got a breathing-spell I went to the theater or did something really worth while. But I guess a call is a call, whether it's in Washington or back home. Do as the people do in Tuscarora, and you can't go wrong."

This sounded reasonable, but somehow fell short of her needs. Viewed merely as an affair between two women, the ordeal need not terrify. If she understood Mrs. Pratt, however, the ceremony was nothing so human. It was more like a high conference between powers. One was mistress of the White House, the wife of the President of the United States of America. The other, she reflected—the dogmas of the red parlor ever present—had for husband one who, in his sphere, also represented the sovereign people. This was what it meant to be an "official lady." She must not only do Stephen Braisted credit; she had to uphold the dignity of the Empire State.

Night found her still wretchedly perplexed. Coming by herself into the lobby after dinner and meeting no acquaintance however slight, such a deluge of homesickness gushed over her

that she faced round with no thought but to gain her own room and sob the black fit away. As her eyes were suffused she avoided the elevator and had blindly mounted the first flight of the dim-lit stairs when organ music, muted by distance or intervening walls, arrested her. Then, as she listened, women's voices joined the instrument in a familiar hymn. It was a Scotch hymn, and had somber associations, yet by some emotional paradox it soothed and comforted. When the music ceased she heard a stir close at hand and made out one of the colored maids giving way to her on the landing.

"I jes' love hymns," explained the girl, apologetically.

"Is it a prayer-meeting?" she asked.

"No'm. Jes' hymns. Some of the ladies mos' gen'rally sings in the back drawing-room Sunday nights, an' when I cayn't go to church I come heah an' listen."

The organ began again, and Olive seated herself on the topmost stair.

"That's 'Lead, Kindly Light,'" she said. "One of my favorites."

"'Beulah Land' is mine," returned the maid. "I like 'Whiter'n Snow,' too. I 'spose it's 'cause I'm blacker'n coal."

Olive knew not how to answer this; but, perceiving that the girl hung deferentially back, she made a place for her on the stair.

"Sit where you were, Milly," she invited,

"Oh no, ma'am," protested the servant.

"Why not? You'd do it in church, wouldn't you?"

Thus urged, she came forward; and in democratic equality they listened together while the unseen choir sang one after another of the hymns which, poetry or doggerel—and many were indeed not poetic save by association—have struck deep root into the emotional life of the race. In most cases it was the tune which moved Olive; but, whether by virtue of music or words, all were hallowed, and, being so, brought peace. For the hour, at least, she ceased to borrow trouble for the morrow.

In this regained tranquillity she slept, and in the morning rose with a resolve to face the ordeal at once. She said nothing of her purpose to her husband, for, when not immersed in his breakfast newspaper, the opening of Congress still filled his mind.

"Oh, by the way, Ollie," he told her, as they parted, "here's your pasteboard for the Members' Gallery. This will pass you or any of the family whenever you take a notion to see how we run the nation. Why don't you come up at twelve o'clock to-day and watch the wheels begin to turn? I guess it will be worth while. If you do take the trip, start early, for the gallery will probably be full. If it wasn't the first day I'd say come and have a bite with me on Capitol Hill."

"That's all right, Steve," she said. "Let the lunch go till you feel less like a cat in a strange garret."

The well-worn simile did not please his lofty mood.

"I'm still a good deal of a tenderfoot, of course," he rejoined; "but I flatter myself I don't look it. I've been taken for an old stager by several people. I don't propose to let Washington bluff me!"

Left to herself, Olive set about a toilet to which, for the credit of Stephen Braisted and the honor of New York, she devoted more time than on any other occasion in her married life. She was more concerned with the attainment of an immaculate neatness than with a choice of raiment. The latter business was simple, inasmuch as she had only to select her best, about which her mind harbored no faintest doubt. Almost as basic in her traditions as her belief in the Decalogue was her conviction that no garment so befitted the great ceremonials of life as a decent black silk. The fashion mattered little, for the dress instinct was not keen in her; it must be good silk; it must be fast black. An ancestral fetish—for her mother and her mother's mother had counted it a badge of true refinement—the fact that she had throughout the lean years been forced to forego its symbolic use magnified its value in her esteem.

But there was another detail of her dress quite

as full of meaning and of far greater intrinsic worth. When the last lock had been subdued, the final hook wedded to its eyelet, and every fold hung to her taste, Olive opened a trunk and from an inner sanctuary extracted a lacquered box, from which, in turn, she lifted a limp parcel done up in blue tissue-paper. This last wrapper removed, there emerged a piece of yellowed lace. Whether fashion would permit or frown upon its present use detained her not an instant. Was it not a precious possession, an heirloom, a symbol, like the silk? Descending from mother to daughter, five generations had lovingly fingered its intricate mesh. Pioneer women all, the story of its wanderings epitomized much of the conquest of the American wilderness. Three of the bygone generations had fastened it at their throats with a cameo of generous size; and Olive, though prosperity had brought jewels, held religiously to their custom. No modern trinket ever dimmed the glory of the brooch.

She set out on foot, for it seemed nonsense to call a carriage for such a tiny journey, and made such good progress that the forenoon was still young when she turned in at the White House driveway. She was elated to perceive that, of all the vast calling army which would doubtless besiege the place during the month, she herself was the only soul now bound toward the great portico. It was partly to secure this

advantage that she had pitched on the morning for her visit, although the desire to get it promptly over with had played its part in her decision. To go as one of many might put her in countenance; but she reasoned that, since the thing must be done, she would rather do it with dignity.

This strategic point gained, it deeply mortified her to discover, on her arrival at the door, that she had again mislaid her visiting-cards. After witnessing Fern's chagrin at Beauchamp Manor she had resolved so firmly nevermore to offend that it seemed incredible she should now, of all times, be found wanting; and, while the door-attendant waited, she searched her handbag over and over, and, finally, in last desperate resort, turned her back and ransacked a secret pocket of the black silk. When this quest, too, proved fruitless, she rounded on the man with a look of such complete self-contempt that he gave way to a wide grin, whereupon she, too, put a cheerful face on the matter.

"Some day I'll forget my head," she confided.

"Is it your card-case, madam?"

"Yes," she replied. "I certainly ought to have it padlocked to my wrist. Well, anyhow, I'm Mrs. Braisted—Congressman Braisted's wife."

The official was obviously prepared for such an emergency.

"We can furnish you with blank cards, Mrs. Braisted," he at once suggested.

"Would that be better?"

"Very much. This way, please, for a moment." He led her into the main corridor and to a small corner room at the right, just within the door of which stood a desk.

"You can write here," he said, laying pen and cards before her.

Olive made another vain dive into her shopping-bag.

"Now it's my glasses that are missing," she apologized. "Probably I left them in the basket where I keep my needlework. I do hate to make all this trouble, but I must depend on you to do the writing."

Her friendly mentor seated himself in her stead.

"Mr. Braisted's first name is—?"

She gave it, wondering a little at this ignorance in one otherwise so efficient.

"You write a beautiful hand," she said, thanking him, and, adding "I'll just wait out here where there is more to see," betook herself to a seat on a low bench across the corridor.

Glimpses of high-ceiled, stately rooms met her glance, and somewhere near she distinguished the rustle of a woman's draperies descending a stair; but she had barely registered these impressions when her eye harked back to the civil-spoken attendant who had come to the threshold

of his retreat and stood staring over at her with her cards balanced in his palm. Clearly something was amiss, though what, she could not divine, and a wave of red flooded her embarrassed face as he made his deliberate way to her side. Did he take her for an impostor!

"Isn't the President's wife at home?" she queried.

He brightened as if her question had shifted a burden.

"No," he said, "but we note all calls, you know, for the reception-lists."

"Are you perfectly sure she's not in? I come early so I'd be sure to find her."

"There is no doubt about her not being at home, madam," he returned, suavely.

Olive rose in disappointment to depart.

"I suppose you'd ought to know," she sighed. "You probably saw her go out."

He did not gainsay her; but a glint of amusement lit his eye, which she, without comprehending it, chanced to perceive. At the same instant the feminine rustle she had remarked a moment since swept nearer, and now, reaching an open space behind the rear colonnade, embodied itself as the one lady of the nation whose identity the illustrated prints left in no possible doubt. Olive gave the gracious figure but a second's scrutiny, and then moved to meet her.

"Of course you're the President's wife," she

said. "I was afraid I'd missed you. The man was bound you wa'n't on the premises."

The lady included her caller and the attendant in a single glance, took the cards which he silently offered, and then, turning smilingly on Olive, put out her hand.

"They don't always know," she laughed, as if letting her into a secret. "I often slip in and out by side doors without giving an account of myself. It makes the White House seem more like a home."

The caller nodded sympathetically.

"I can see how that is," she responded. "You feel exactly like a wax dummy in a show-case. I know you do, because I've had the feeling myself on a small scale. Whenever strangers come to Tuscarora Falls folks point out the relish works and our new house, and, if any of us happens to be on the veranda, they show us off too."

As if the name Tuscarora supplied a missing key, a puzzled expression in her listener's eyes gave way to certainty.

"I use the Braisted Relish myself," she said. "The President is very fond of it."

Olive flushed to the hair with pleasure.

"You don't tell me, ma'am!" she cried. "Steve will be most wonderfully set up to hear it. I little thought the day would come when I'd stand here in the White House and be told a thing like that! Tell your husband to try a

mite of the relish with spring lamb. It's judged better than mint-sauce by some. But listen to me, presuming to advise about the President's diet! Still, it's all of a piece with the fairy tale I've been living these three years now. It seems sometimes as if I just had to wake up."

A beautiful light came into the face of the other woman, and she slipped her arm within Olive's.

"Sometimes I pinch myself, too," she confessed, drawing her toward a neighboring room. "Let's sit down and talk it over."

CHAPTER V

AS she reviewed the event on her way back to the Walden it seemed part of the same impossible dream that she should have remained nearly an hour in the White House talking steadily of her own affairs. Noiseless servants had come, hovered in doorways, and at a nod gone their way again with their messages undelivered; and she, perceiving this, had thrice risen to go and twice reseated herself to answer some query of her hostess, who, sending her finally away with her arms filled with roses, had with her parting word charged her to return. It put a spell upon her to think of it, and she was still under its influence when Steve, coming home early, found her seated in rapt meditation before the flowers.

"Hello!" he sang out. "That bouquet must have cost money. Who footed the bill?"

"Congress, I suppose."

"What!"

She enjoyed his curiosity a moment.

"They come from the White House, Steve. Just think of it!"

Braisted stared from his wife to the flowers, and then closed one eye in a skeptical wink.

"I'm expecting a case of champagne from the Czar of Russia, myself," he drawled. "What's set you joking, Ollie? It don't seem natural."

"But I'm in sober earnest. The President's wife gave me these with her own hands when I made our call."

"Our call!"

"We're expected to pay our respects to the White House," she instructed, rather proud of her knowledge. "All the official people have to do it."

"Yes, of course. Everybody knows that. But what is this about the President's wife seeing you?"

As she explained he vented a long astonished whistle.

"So *they* use our product, do they?" he interrupted. "What a bully ad I could get out of it! 'Endorsed by the White House!' How would that, say in red letters, strike you on the wrapper?"

"No, no!" she protested.

"Only on the outside wrapper. We wouldn't touch the label."

"You mustn't do anything like that, Steve. Promise me you won't."

"Oh, all right," he agreed. "On second thought, I don't hardly suppose I ought. Being a Congressman has its penalties. Go ahead with your story. She took you into the Blue Room, you say?"

"I said it was the room with the blue curtains."

"That's right; and blue silk walls, too. I took particular notice when I went through last spring. Did you see the clock? Napoleon gave it to Lafayette, and he passed it along to Washington. And, of course, you saw the big East Room and the State Dining-Room?"

"I don't know that I did."

"You don't know?"

"No, honestly I can't remember. I didn't pay much attention to anything but her. We had a long talk, and I guess I told her everything I know. It wa'n't only about the relish and our hard times. She was so sympathetic that somehow or other I dug up a lot of things I'd 'most forgot. I even told her about my great-grandmother's wedding journey on a cow, for she took notice of my pin and old lace and wanted to hear the whole history. You'd ought to have heard her laugh! Yet, another time, we were both crying. She had lost children herself, both babies, like mine."

Braisted walked over to a window and drummed the pane, and she thought that in his man's way he was moved by the old grief; but when he presently faced about it was not of their dead children that he spoke.

"Don't you and Mrs. Estabrook weigh up about even?" he asked.

She made the transition slowly.

"Weigh?"

"I should say there wasn't a pound's difference, yet *she* doesn't look fat. If it's tailoring does the trick, I'd advise you to try the same shop. I daresay you could get it out of her in some roundabout way."

Criticism of her dress from him was a novelty, and she looked for the twinkle of the eye which usually accompanied and labeled his drolleries; but his expression was not humorous.

"What put that in your head, Steve?"

"It struck me the other day; but it was this call of yours that brought it back just now. Mrs. Estabrook could have warned you against such a break. Not that it's done any great harm," he added. "The White House people probably have got the name of Braisted fixed in their minds in a way they otherwise wouldn't."

"What do you mean?" she faltered.

"I mean that, playing strictly according to rules, you were dead wrong. All you were expected to do was to leave those cards, not actually call. I'm a verdant proposition here myself; but I could have put you onto that. Why didn't you ask somebody?"

"I did ask Ben."

"Did Ben Halsey tell you it was the proper thing here to go calling in the forenoon?"

"No, no. He didn't really know; but he thought if I did as we do out home it would be all right. Don't blame Ben."

"I do blame Ben. He's a nice sort of secretary to give you such advice. I made a mistake in bringing him down with me. I've got acquainted with a chap who's worth ten of young Halsey. But Proctor Hoyt is too big a man for a secretary's job. Anyhow, it's a woman pilot you need, so I say get thick with somebody like Mrs. Estabrook who knows the ropes."

"I hate her!" blazed Olive.

"Eh?" Her vehemence took him by surprise.

"I hate her!" she repeated, in the sting of her mortification. "I wish I might never lay eyes on her again."

The apparent unreason of this storm irked the man.

"Tantrums don't look well at your time of life," he admonished. "And all because I like the fit of another woman's clothes!"

She gasped at this analysis of her outburst. After all, it did have the appearance of turning on a triviality. She was unwilling, however, to let him see how true his aim had been, and in self-defense indignantly rehearsed what had drifted to her over the Estabrook transom the night of her arrival. But to her astonishment Steve's interest focused, not on Mrs. Estabrook's double dealing, but on the attitude of her husband.

"So he thinks maybe it's worth his while to cultivate me," he chuckled. "Well, I'm willing. I can make use of a man of his size, by

and by. Now try and bottle up your feeling as to his wife. She's no more of a humbug than most of us. Only fools show their whole hand. I'm playing a bigger game myself than I let on."

She was too self-absorbed to heed his hint of important matters beneath the surface, and the flowers which a moment ago had given her such proud satisfaction now served to brim the salt cup of her humiliation. On swift impulse she pressed an electric call-bell, and, the maid who loved hymns answering, she thrust the whole fragrant cluster into her hands.

"If anybody in the house is sick, give them these roses," she directed. "If not, keep them yourself, Milly. Keep some for yourself, anyhow."

Braisted watched the transaction open-mouthed.

"Now, what in the name of reason made you do that, Olive?" he demanded, as the door closed on the mystified negress.

"I couldn't abide the sight of them any more."

"I don't see why."

"Then you're blind."

"Maybe I am; but I can't for the life of me fathom why you're so put out. No matter how you went, you made a hit. That's the main thing. I'm sorry you were so hasty about the flowers. I'd thought of sending them down to the dining-room for our table."

"I couldn't have swallowed a morsel with them there."

"Oh yes, you could. Things will look different when you cool off. Those White House roses would have made people sit up when they got a hint where they came from."

Olive faced him in stormy desperation.

"Stephen Braisted," she charged, "don't you dare mention my call to a living soul!"

"Oh, hang the whole business!" he snapped, taking umbrage himself. "After this, paddle your own canoe any silly way you like. I'm glad I'm not too pig-headed to take advice."

He tramped huffily out of the room, leaving Olive already repentant of the outburst which she rightly attributed to nerves. After all, she reasoned, Steve was not to blame. Her confidence in her own judgment was rudely shaken. If she could not be her natural self, if the common sense which had been her life-long shield and buckler was of no avail in this artificial scheme of existence, whither should she turn?

Yet, presently, things did look a trifle brighter, as Steve had foretold, and, her sharp interdict to her husband notwithstanding, the White House call was mentioned, and by herself. It was Mrs. Tully, of Maine, who pulled her from her slough of despond. When, in the quiet hour before dinner, Olive stepped out of the elevator down-stairs, the old lady beckoned her over to her usual coign of vantage, a leather sofa screened

from draughts, but in no wise isolated from the shifting comedy of the Walden lobby.

"I've been watching for you," she announced, briskly.

"I'm thankful somebody feels like watching for me," said Olive, warmed by her friendliness.

As she took her seat Mrs. Tully eyed her shrewdly.

"Feel like a grass widow?" she queried, and then, without awaiting an answer, went on: "I did, nearly all of Mr. Tully's first session."

"It isn't only Mr. Braisted," said Olive. "I miss my children, too, particularly Fern. It don't seem possible she's right here in the city. But you didn't meet her."

"I saw her. She's very sweet and pretty—more than pretty. You must have her down for the first dance on Saturday week."

Olive caught joyfully at the suggestion.

"I will," she said. "I'll write to Miss Abercrombie to-night."

"But don't mention dance to her," counseled the old lady. "She thinks that nothing less than an embassy ball is good enough for a Beauchamp Manor girl. Just say you want to have your daughter with you for over Sunday. Trust me to see that she has plenty of partners. I know most of the young fellows who come in dance nights."

"They ask people from outside?"

"Dear me, yes. What sort of partners would

these old fogies make?" she demanded, indicating two or three Congressmen who now entered. "The baldest and fattest is my husband," she added, laughingly. "Yet even he could dance once! He proposed to me at a country hop, in fact. But how I do run on! What I set out to talk about was something very different. It's calls."

"Oh," sighed Olive, dolorously.

Her companion laughed again.

"You heard more than enough of that subject in the red parlor, I see. But don't you be frightened by Harriet Pratt. As I said before, you'll enjoy the comic side of calling, once you're started."

"I have started," owned Olive, wondering grimly wherein lay the humor of her morning's adventure. "I called at the White House today."

"Did you?" said Mrs. Tully, calmly, as if it were a matter of slight importance. "If I'd known you were going I'd have walked over with you and left cards myself. Then maybe we could have done a few of the bothersome nobodies who expect you to ask if they're at home. But perhaps you prefer to go alone?"

"No, no." She clutched avidly at the hope of company in her misery. "I'd be only too glad and thankful to go with you. You don't know what a load it would take off my mind. I'm sure you've no call to be so kind."

"Don't you humbug yourself," warned Mrs. Tully, her eyes twinkling. "It's not kindness on my part. It's plain Yankee cuteness. The Maine soil doesn't grow many millionaires, especially among its politicians, and I always have to share carriage expenses with somebody. I thought perhaps you'd be willing, as I know my way round and you don't."

The new-comer was relieved beyond words.

"But there won't be any expenses to share," she insisted, with an instant generosity which won her a friend. "Steve said he would arrange for a rig by the season so that I could drive any time I wanted. You're welcome to use it at any time, too."

"Dear no," demurred the old lady. "We Maine folks like to pay our own way."

"So do Tuscarora people," declared Olive, laughingly, "and that's why I won't take a cent from you. It's a fair bargain; you furnish the experience, I find the carriage."

"If you really think I've something to barter—"

"Oh, do call it settled," pleaded Olive.

"Well, then, I will; though I'm heartily ashamed of myself. Up to date we Tullys could always say we were poor but honest. Now we'll map out the campaign. I won't brag about my record like somebody I won't mention, but I will guarantee to get you over a good piece of the ground before Christmas."

And so she did; but it left her pupil scant time for anything else. With the exception of one flying visit to the House, when she used her Member's ticket for the first time, and, despite a conscientious search, failed to discover Steve at all, she viewed the Capitol at the end of some long vista, or possibly from some nearer angle, on the day when the residents in the immediate shadow of its dome received. But, if she saw few of the stock wonders, she penetrated a bewildering number of hotels, boarding-houses, and semi-private homes, many of them commonplace, some beautiful, others—embassies these—curiously exotic or, as she phrased it, queer, with humble uncertainty whether to condemn or admire. The details of one drawing-room blurred with the next, so rapidly did these establishments succeed one another, and rather more than half the time Olive was ignorant of the identity of her hostess of the hurrying moment. In truth, the one name of which she was at all times sure was her own, which the usually colored and invariably deep-voiced footman would boom forth with embarrassing distinctness. Everywhere she met restless throngs of women, all bent on the same feverish game, all mouthing the same empty chatter. She enacted a mute rôle herself, in the main, having no small change of local gossip as yet. Her native supply, though copious, passed current easily with none save the homespun.

Yet, while she thought it folly, she did not escape a certain hectic exhilaration whenever, luck attending, their tally chanced to reach the thirties. The great advantage of bagging several hostesses in a single drawing-room—scene abhorrent to the fastidious Mrs. Estabrook—now became crystal-clear; and when, thanks to this frugal custom, they one afternoon actually succeeded in breaking Mrs. Pratt's vaunted record, Olive came back to the Walden aglow with triumph and boasted of the tremendous achievement to Steve.

"Forty-five!" he repeated. "Good work! I knew you'd enjoy yourself here as soon as the strangeness wore off. Your toting the cards about is a help to me also. I'm too busy getting next to important people to bother with the small fry. You picked out a good running-mate in Mrs. Tully, though I hardly think you appreciate what shrewd politics you were playing. Her husband is a power in the House. He's on the most important committees."

"Is he?" she responded, incuriously. "I didn't take to Mrs. Tully on his account. In fact, I'd known her several days before I was introduced to him. He's a plain-spoken, simple sort of man."

"Simple!" Her husband laughed boisterously. "Jim Tully has got the hardest head in his delegation. You do get queer notions about people, Ollie, no mistake. But what about

Fern?" he asked, as he caught sight of a note in the girl's handwriting. "Can she come down to the high jinks here to-morrow night?"

"Yes; but she don't know that there's to be a dance. I only said to bring her white muslin for whatever might turn up. She will be surprised. Ben Halsey already has a programme for her. He gave it to me to-day."

Braisted shifted his cigar thoughtfully.

"He has his own name down good and plenty, I dare say?"

"No. He said he hadn't the cheek to do that."

"Oh, he did?"

"He only put crosses opposite the dances he specially wanted."

The man liberated a series of meditative smoke-rings.

"Better rub out a few of 'em, Ollie," he counseled. "I don't want him to imagine he's got a mortgage on Fern. Between her good looks and my prospects I expect her to fly high."

"I don't want her to fly anywhere just yet," said his wife. "Fern is only a child."

CHAPTER VI

WHILE she said nothing about the matter, Olive privately determined to allow Fern a free rein with her programme, and she was neither surprised nor alarmed that it pleased her to let Ben Halsey's tentative crosses stand as they were. Fern apparently devoted little thought to the subject. She was girlishly excited over the unexpected dance, which promised to surpass even the brilliant functions arranged by Tuscarora Falls's most exclusive volunteer fire company.

"Why, the orchestra is part of the Marine Band," said Olive, who had discovered the high rank accorded that organization in Washington esteem. "You know they play at the White House."

"Yes, I know," nodded Fern. "I shall hear them there at one of the big receptions after New-Year's. Miss Abercrombie always gets invitations. The Beauchamp Manor girls know how to appear."

Reminded of her own adventures in that august scene, Olive was beset by a longing to make a clean breast of her blunder; but she had an intuition

that while her daughter would doubtless listen with the ready sympathy of old, she would also very likely sit in judgment and dispense the law according to Miss Abercrombie. The name of this authority was often in Fern's mouth, and the high precepts of Beauchamp Manor already bore fruit in practice. The first noted of the new accomplishments was her novel and stilted pronunciation of the endearing "momma" which had done loving service since babyhood.

"But Miss Abercrombie says 'ma*ma*' is correct," she replied to Olive's quick protest. "I don't want to appear countrified, momma—I mean, mama."

"I don't wonder it sticks in your throat! You can call me what you like up at Beauchamp Manor; but to my face it must be the old name or mother. Take your choice!"

Fern pouted; but the cloud was fleeting, for there were too many things to talk about. As they dressed for the evening, Olive described the meeting of the official ladies in the red parlor, and outlined the exhausting campaign, generaled by Mrs. Tully, which had followed.

"And pretty nigh the only change I've had," she went on, "was last Tuesday, when it come our turn—"

"Came, mother."

"Came our turn here at the Walden. It was a change, sure enough; but it wa'n't—I suppose your prim Miss Abercrombie would say 'wasn't'?"

Fern considered the point seriously.

"Miss Abercrombie would more likely say 'was not,'" she decided. "She is most particular."

"Well, as I started to tell you, it certainly was not—how stiff that sounds!—a rest. Seeing as it's so near Christmas, we spent the whole afternoon hanging evergreen and holly all over the parlors. At any rate, some of us did. Mrs. Pratt put in her time pointing out our mistakes. Mrs. Estabrook didn't show up at all for work; but she was right on hand later, and, for all her talk, her basket was down on the hall table with the rest. Mrs. Pratt had the blinds drawn and the gas lighted, though it was still broad daylight outdoors when Garfield—he's the head waiter—begun swelling up his chest like a pigeon and calling out folks' names. How they did stream along! There must have been hundreds. Mrs. Estabrook edged off a ways, as if she didn't belong with us, and held a little reception of her own. You should have seen Mrs. Pratt's face! I stood next to Mrs. Tully, and was simply dumfounded at the packs of people who knew me. Women called me by name that I couldn't remember I'd ever laid eyes on, and when, after it was all over, I went to look at my basket, it was full! The only way I can account for it is by the relish. If one person has mentioned it to me, there's been a regiment."

"What did you wear?" asked Fern, from the mirror.

"This same black silk I've got on. Most of the ladies wore something light."

"So must you next time." She was about to quote the sage of Beauchamp Manor; but, perceiving her mother's lips tighten, contented herself with adding: "It will make a nice change for you," and, hanging a simple chain around her neck, announced her toilet complete.

"Where's your new bracelet and the ruby brooch your father gave you your last birthday?" asked Olive, who had taken covert notice of all her preparations.

"Miss Abercrombie is always warning the girls not to overload themselves with jewelry. She says it's common."

Her mother refrained from direct comment; but when they finally appeared below stairs for the dance she gleamed and twinkled under such an incrustation of ornament that even Braisted became observant and asked whether she did not feel like a Christmas tree, a remark which, being overheard by Fern, destroyed at a blow the dignity of her protest. Steve himself, she noted with suddenly sharpened vision, had in this respect exercised most rigid self-restraint. The diamond studs he had acquired with his first evening dress, early in his meteoric rise, no longer blazed in his linen, and the limbo of outgrown toys had likewise engulfed a heavy

watch-chain he had been wont to festoon across his generous waistline. Hale, ruddy, self-contained, wearing the specious air of prolonged youth with which artificial light always endowed him, he was quite the most striking figure among the men, and as such now became proper quarry for Mrs. Estabrook, who, elaborately coifed and modishly gowned, her plump shoulders freely displayed, was toying with her programme like a débutante. At Olive's last view of them, as the alert Mrs. Tully took Fern and herself in charge, she beheld Steve possess himself of the too obvious dance-card and smilingly pencil his name. For the first time in her life his wife thought he looked foolish.

True to her promise, Mrs. Tully assumed an active supervision over Fern's interests, and so numerous were her satellites that Ben Halsey, coming late, found his modest landmarks set at naught. He looked his straightforward, honest, reliable best as he made his way forward, his color heightened by his haste, and Olive's fond heart shared his disappointment.

"Truly, I'm sorry, Ben," she heard Fern murmur. "There were so many of them scrambling for my card at once that I lost track. You are sure of the supper dance, though, and the last waltz. I wrote your name down myself. Don't be cross. The others have only one apiece."

"Bother the others!" he retorted, gloomily. "What are the others to me?"

"They're something to me. A girl wants more than one partner."

"You might have remembered how I felt about the first dance—your first in Washington."

She tossed her head at his tone.

"Then you should have come earlier."

"I couldn't. Your father gave me such a mountain of work it's a wonder I'm here at all."

Olive, trying not to listen, wondered whether Steve had done this thing of deliberate purpose. The aggrieved Ben vanished before she could console him, and, as a loud strain of orchestral music gave warning of the first number, Fern, too, sped away with her partner toward the dining-room which the blacks had transformed into a flag-draped hall suggesting little or nothing of its accustomed use.

With her usual genius for choosing posts of observation, Mrs. Tully now secured places which, out of danger from collision with awkward dancers, were yet of the gaiety and commanded a view of the entire floor.

"Once I pitied the old and middle-aged who sat back and looked on," she said, settling herself comfortably; "but, now that I'm an old fogy myself, I actually feel sorry for the solemn youngsters who dance. We put more vim into our merrymakings than this new generation thinks polite. But I except your daughter, Mrs. Braisted," she added, immediately, as Fern,

slender and graceful, glided by. "Her eyes shine as if dancing were meat and drink to her. I hope Beauchamp Manor won't take the spirit out of her."

"I'll risk it," declared Olive, proudly. "I know Fern."

The older woman made no immediate rejoinder, but her keen gaze followed Fern while she danced and watched her closely when, between numbers, she sought them out and chatted vivaciously of the prodigious nothings which fill an unspoiled young girl's existence. After she had floated away on the rhythm of a famous waltz Mrs. Tully laid her hand for an instant on the mother's.

"Yes," she agreed, "you can risk it. She'll pick up ways you can't stand; she'll maybe do things you'll like less, for when the sap is young in us we're wiser than Solomon ever was; but if her head gets a trifle turned, don't fret. Her heart will bring it true again. This is real cheery talk for a party, isn't it?" she broke off, with a laugh, as Olive's face sobered. "That old music set me prosing."

"You've raised a girl yourself, I reckon?"

"Two. And both are happily married, thank goodness! After all, that's the main thing that gives us mothers gray hair, but not in the way men commonly suppose. They think that we worry for fear our girls won't marry; but our real dread is lest they marry wrong. Anyhow,

it was a great bugaboo with me, though my own venture couldn't have been happier."

"Fern's marriage needn't bother me yet," commented Olive; but her mind reverted to Ben Halsey, who, swallowing his disappointment, was devoting himself to the wall-flowers with a chivalry she knew to be characteristic. "When the time does come," she added, "I suppose she'll have to take her woman's chance."

"Yes; and it will help a lot if you'll make her realize that the man takes a chance, too," said Mrs. Tully. "There, standing in the door, is one of the men who drew a blank."

"Mr. Estabrook?"

"I'm sure of it. From the first, that pair have struck me as people chained to the ashes of a dead passion. Neither of them can act a part all the time. He was off his guard a moment ago when he caught sight of his wife. I don't think he expected she would dance."

It was Mrs. Estabrook's first appearance on the floor; and, though her partner's years could have numbered little more than half her own, she languished in his rather gingerly embrace with such a fusillade of smiles, pouts, and side-long glances as would have abashed a Romeo. A mirthful convulsion had its way with Mrs. Tully's abundant wrinkles, and, hastily unfurling a fan, she took her laugh in comfort.

"What a droll world it is!" she sighed. "My

heart bleeds for the husband—there; he's fled, poor man—and my sides shake at her."

Olive could indulge in neither of these emotions. On tenter-hooks of dismay, she could only ask herself what sort of figure her Steve would cut when it came his turn to guide this preposterous woman in the dance. As it fell out, however, his number was a quadrille, and Mrs. Estabrook's flirtatious battery, handicapped by long range, became less deadly; but it was still active enough to divert every one save Olive, who, crimson with vicarious embarrassment while the spectacle lasted, still seethed when Braisted, rather pleased with himself on the whole, sauntered over to her chair.

"The old dog hasn't forgotten all his tricks," he beamed. "Guess I surprised you, didn't I?"

"You did," agreed his wife, crisply.

"I can't remember just when I footed it last," he continued, disregarding her coolness and turning to Mrs. Tully; "but I think I did so-so. What do you say?"

"I certainly enjoyed watching you," said the old lady, demurely.

Braisted put his own interpretation on her diplomatic response.

"There you are, Ollie," he laughed. "Mrs. Tully doesn't think I'm too old, and if I'm not, neither are you. There's to be a Virginia reel by and by. Let me lead you out."

"I couldn't be bribed to do it," she answered, ungraciously.

Her tone nettled him; but he affected to take her remark in jest.

"She is really dying to dance," he confided, in mock aside to Mrs. Tully, who began to find her rôle difficult; "but she's jealous because I asked another woman first."

"Jealous!" That luckless word, painfully close to the truth, scout the thought as she might, blew her smoldering wrath to a flame. "Jealous of her! Couldn't you see, Steve, that you two were just a laughing-stock for the whole hotel?"

The orchestra opportunely struck up a two-step, and the man removed himself with what grace he could muster. Olive gnawed her heart in helpless gloom. Her pride forbade her to discuss the matter; but neither could she talk of indifferent things. Happily Mrs. Tully came to the rescue with lively chatter of nothing in particular which cloaked the real and absorbing purpose of both women to mark the further movements of the outraged Steve.

The veteran observer, surveying mankind from the viewpoint of a laughing philosopher, could forecast Braisted's course with fair accuracy; but Olive, whose matrimonial tempests had never before centered around a third person feminine, was utterly taken aback by the abandon of his protest. Not only did he devote himself

throughout the supper interval to the heaping of Mrs. Estabrook's plate in plain view of Mrs. Tully and his fasting helpmate, but he repeated his prime offense with such sweeping indifference to what any one might say that his wife was stricken with fears for his sanity. No tame quadrille or lancers this time sufficed. Nothing but a round dance, a dreamy waltz by preference, could express the reckless scope of his revolt; and the joint effect of his gymnastics and Mrs. Estabrook's languishing archness rocked the little world of the Walden with a mirth which became a joyous tradition for many days.

CHAPTER VII

BRAISTED did not hasten his bed-going that night; but, late as it was, he found his wife still up, for Olive, grieved now rather than angry, had purposely loitered in Fern's room that she might make peace with him before she slept. As he entered their sitting-room she closed Fern's door and faced him with a conciliatory smile.

"I want to see you, Steve," she said.

"Oh, you do!" he grunted, brushing by to his desk.

She waited patiently for him to tire of opening and shutting drawers.

"Well?" he conceded, at last. "What is it?"

"Only this; it's never been like us to flare up before folks, and I'm sorry for my part of it."

He listened stiff-necked and surly.

"That all?" he demanded, after a pause.

"Yes; that's all."

"Then I've got something to say myself; but it's no apology, and don't you expect one for a minute. When I'm wrong I know it as soon as the next person."

"I'm not asking you to apologize, Steve.

Nobody accuses you of anything wrong. I got mad at you down-stairs because I always want to feel proud of you, and when to-night—well, people *did* laugh. I saw them. And you know yourself that Mrs. Estabrook—"

"There you go!" he crashed in, wrathfully. "I'd have bet my head that would bob up. Now you listen to me! It doesn't matter a tinker's dam whether I can dance or not, or whether Mrs. Estabrook can dance or not. The real question is, are you going to be a help to me or a handicap?"

Her eyes filled with instant tears.

"Steve! You can ask that? And after all these years?"

"I can ask it because I'm not living in the past, but in the present; and by that I don't mean Tuscarora Falls, where you seem to be vegetating still. My post-office address is Washington, D. C. Things can't be done in any one-horse way in this town, and whether you like the customs of the place or not, it's a case of fall in line or be left behind with the two-spots. Now *I* don't propose to be left behind."

"God forbid I should hinder you."

"Then learn city ways; mix with the people who'll be useful. I've got too much at stake to take a back seat. I'm not publishing all I've got in mind these days—I'm bound in confidence to keep a good many matters dark—but this I will say, that if things go as they should, the Tusca-

rora concern will only be a side issue, a mere patch on my interests. In fact, the time may come when we'll not want to bother with it any longer."

She took fright at his audacious dreams.

"Oh, don't ever kick away the ladder we've climbed by, Steve," she implored; "it's tempting Providence."

He had talked himself into good-humor now and could laugh at her pious apprehension.

"I only said the time might come," he reassured; "but I dare say I'll never be too busy to keep an eye on the old plant. A pickle trust may come along and squeeze us some day; but I'm losing no sleep about it. Maybe I'll be in a position to do the squeezing myself if it ever comes to a merger. But never mind that. And never mind my shortness just now either, Ollie. You'll see yet that my head is screwed on right side foremost."

She said "All right, Steve," and would have gone to bed with a tranquil mind had not Fern's programme chanced to fall under Braisted's eye. With an angry imprecation which drew her round, he flattened the crumpled card beneath the drop-light and searched it from end to end. It was not easy to decipher. The chirography tilted at every angle, and in some instances gave place to hieroglyphics, while one partner with a turn for caricature had merely indicated himself as a long nose surmounted by eyeglasses.

Where the name Halsey occurred, he perceived that the girl herself had recorded it.

"Olive!" he called, sharply.

His wife came back to his side.

"What's wrong, Steve?"

"A lot. You pinned Ben Halsey down to two dances, I see. Well, even two proved too many."

"Hush!" she warned. "Fern will hear you."

"She'll hear me in the morning flat enough," he promised, grimly. "Our talk drove her affair out of my mind for the moment. Nice business my secretary is up to!"

Olive's motherhood left her sympathies no choice of sides.

"I hope, Steve, you haven't done anything rash?"

Braisted rapped the programme smartly with the back of his hand.

"When you were rubbing out Halsey's crosses," he demanded, "why didn't you make a clean sweep?"

"I didn't interfere at all," she owned, frankly. "I left it to Fern's common sense."

"*Her* common sense! She hasn't any."

"What has the child done? Why don't you tell me what's happened?"

But the programme still obsessed him.

"If you let her have the run of it, how did it happen he didn't get more?"

She explained, and he gave a harsh laugh.

"Pity I didn't delay him still more! I would have done it if I'd had my wits about me. Perhaps then the mischief wouldn't have happened. I tell you I'll nip this thing in the bud if I have to spank her and boot him. The impudence of the fellow! Does he make a red cent that I don't pay him? Has he any prospects whatever? Is she to—"

"For mercy's sake tell me what you're blustering about," broke in his wife. "What crime have these children committed?"

"Oh, it's no joking matter," he retorted. "These two little fools have come to some kind of an understanding."

Olive threw up her hands.

"Has Ben said something?"

"To me?" His expression would have done credit to an ogre. "I should remark not. Just let the puppy dare mention it to me!"

"Then how do you know anything about it? I'm sure you didn't get it from Fern. She would naturally come to me first."

"She has come to nobody, the sly minx! What I know I saw myself in a dark corner. Toward the end of the evening I happened on them sitting out a dance, and he was kissing her."

He dramatized his climax with such impetuosity that his final words hissed; and Olive, instead of expressing horror, met him with a smile.

"You sound like a steam-boiler," she said. "I hope they didn't see you."

Her calm staggered him.

"Eh?" he gasped.

"Did they see you?"

"Is that all you've got to say? I should think, as a mother—"

"But *did* they? Answer my question, Steve."

"No. I stepped back. It wasn't the place—"

"Thank goodness!" she exclaimed, with relief. "Now don't mention it to either of them, poor young things! Leave this to me, Steve. A woman—"

"Not mention it!" he cried. "You bet I'll mention it. This tomfoolery is going to end right here. I'll see Miss Fern first and take the nonsense out of her in short order. You let me manage her. It needs a firm hand, a man's hand—"

His disquisition on the masculine touch was never finished, for Fern, a pale, ghostly presence in her nightgown, issued suddenly from her bedroom and braved him with a school-girl's notion of high tragedy, which but for her intense seriousness would have been supremely comic.

"I heard," she said, addressing herself with sepulchral solemnity to her father. "I couldn't help but hear, and I should have been a coward not to come out and answer you. It is better so. You might as well know my mind now as to-morrow morning."

Braisted's jaw dropped.

"*Your* mind!" he repeated, feebly.

"Yes, father. I love Ben, and I always shall. Nothing you can say will make any difference in the end. We'll surely marry some day, even if you thwart us now."

"Marry now!" Her father lifted eloquent hands to Heaven. "My God, listen to the brat!"

"That is the language of passion, and I therefore overlook it," rejoined Fern, with a stateliness of diction Miss Abercrombie might have envied. "You do not seem to realize that love has made a woman of me. When I said 'now' I referred to your opposition, not to an immediate marriage. Ben and I are very practical. We appreciate that he must work hard and be very saving, too. I have already put by some of my allowance, and they give a course of chafing-dish lessons at school which—"

"There, there, dearie," interposed Olive, placing an arm around the erect young shoulders and drawing her away. "Never mind the cooking-lessons to-night. Get back to bed before you take your death of cold. You and I will have a good talk in the morning."

But Fern, assured of her mother's support, stood her ground.

"It's the talk with father I want settled," she insisted. "If he were still clerking in the hardware-store back in Tuscarora Falls, he could sympathize with Ben and do him justice. What is the good of all our money if it is to come be-

tween me and my happiness? It ought to be used to help Ben, not to hinder him. Why shouldn't I help? Where would we all be if mother hadn't helped you? It was her idea—"

"Fern, Fern," remonstrated Olive, "don't speak that way to your father. How many times have I told you that it took his brains—"

"Let him be fair then," proclaimed the rebel. "I want him to promise me not to hurt Ben's feelings; I want him to—"

"Make Ben the first vice-president of the Braisted Imperial Relish Company, I suppose?" suggested her father, blandly. "Or maybe you'd rather see him ambassador to England or Secretary of the Treasury? Don't be bashful. Nothing is too good for a man with a brain of his caliber. Just pick the job and let me know."

Fern's statuesque pose suddenly gave way, and her face went awry like a hurt child's.

"It's cruel of you to make a joke of me," she declared, bursting into tears. "It's cruel, cruel!"

Braisted gazed helplessly at the change he had wrought; and as Olive, telegraphing reproaches across the heaving shoulders, gathered the girl to her breast, he too came to her side and made awkward peace offerings.

"Everything will be all right, Fern," he said. "Get to bed now as your mother tells you. Everything will be all right."

He stared wonderingly after the twain as they

disappeared together, and then, with equal bewilderment, questioned his own image unheroically reflected in the mirror over the mantelpiece. In the same abstraction he fished a cigar from his pocket and lighted it at the wrong end. To him, as to most of his sex, the process by which a woman in the wrong can so juggle the vital issue that the man himself shall feel at fault, was an eternal mystery. After a half-hour which yawned like a millennium, the door of Fern's room reopened and Olive stole softly forth.

"Well?" he queried, with an ironic smile which, though inadequate, seemed the only mask to turn upon the humiliating situation. "What's the latest from the seat of war?"

His wife enjoined quiet with a gesture.

"She's asleep now, the lamb."

"Asleep! Merciful powers! I wish I could take it that easy!"

"There is no reason why you shouldn't, Steve. It needn't have bothered you at all if you had left it to me in the beginning. It's all settled."

"Settled! She agrees to quit her nonsense? She'll give him up?"

"Don't get the cart before the horse. What do you expect of the child in half an hour! She says, of course, that she'll never care for any one else, and that marry him she will some day. It's a thing we can only leave to time."

The beatific relief which had played over her

husband's face at her first words now winked out in total eclipse.

"So that's your settlement!" he exclaimed, disgustedly.

"Do be patient. You can't treat a young girl's first love affair like a business deal. Now listen: you must agree, in the first place, not to say a word about this to Ben or let what you know influence you against him in any way."

Braisted swore a mouth-filling oath which Olive let rumble into futility without contradiction.

"And for her part," she went on, "Fern promises on her honor that she won't say a word to Ben about what we know or feel. She agrees, too, that while she's in school there sha'n't be any love-making, or even letter-writing, between them."

"That's something."

"There's more. I'm to give her a chance to tell him this to-morrow as if it came from herself alone, and at the same time she'll make it clear that he mustn't consider they're engaged. She's real sensible about it, Steve, and, unless you are hasty, she won't dream of doing anything rash."

Braisted digested this pyrrhic victory in frowning silence.

"That's all very well for the present," he said, finally, "though it's going to be a strain on my temper to keep bottled up before young Halsey.

But what about the future? What's going to happen when Fern leaves school?"

Olive had reached the end of her tether.

"You would have settled that, too, in half an hour, I presume? Not being a man, I didn't. You know as well as I do if she thinks the same when she leaves school, she'll have the spunk to marry him whatever we say. She wouldn't be worth her salt if she didn't. Now I for one am going to bed."

Her husband faced the future with less composure. Though bound to silence as regards his secretary, he made up his mind that, so far as he could contrive it, Ben Halsey's meetings with Fern should be few; and since the Christmas holidays seemed to him particularly dangerous, he one day caught eagerly at a casual remark of Olive's that Fern had been invited to New York.

"Write her to accept at once," he directed. "It's a godsend."

The mother was smitten with dismay.

"But her heart isn't set on it," she protested, reading Fern's note afresh. "She only mentions it by the way, and goes on to say how much she counts on being with us."

"With Ben, she means. He's the star attraction in these parts."

Olive refused to believe her child so two-faced.

"We've both counted on it for months," she

said. "Even before we left home we used to talk it over. There are no end of things we planned to do. And besides," she urged, casting about for a clinching argument, "as soon as you favor her going out of town she'll suspect your real reason."

"Of course. That's why you must do the talking. I fell in with your idea of ignoring Halsey's impudence, even though it was a bitter pill, and now I insist on being met half-way myself. Tell her to go, by all means. Tell her it's a part of her education, for, this fool love affair aside, I don't think she ought to miss a chance to visit people who live in New York. Did you say the name was Brown?"

"No, Blount. You've heard of him, Steve. They call him some kind of a king, don't they? Is it guano—"

Braisted swung suddenly about.

"Marshall Blount!" he cried.

"Why, yes. What has stirred you up so? You're staring like one possessed."

He brushed his forehead hazily.

"I happened to think of something, a business proposition," he answered, vaguely. "How did Fern get in with a daughter of Marshall Blount?"

"Philippa Blount's room is just across the hall from Fern's. I meant to tell you that; but so much has happened that I clean forgot to mention it."

Under his eager questioning she rehearsed

the story of her meeting with the heiress, and the singular fact that Philippa knew Ben.

"Ben Halsey a friend of Blount's daughter!" Steve interrupted. "Does he know Marshall Blount, too?"

"I don't know. I can't even tell you how he met her. I forgot to ask Fern when she was here. But I do remember now what Marshall Blount is king of," she added. "It isn't guano. It's asphalt, and—"

"Yes, yes," he nodded, impatiently. "Scratch off a note to Fern right away. There mustn't be any doubt about her going to New York. Maybe she doesn't realize what asphalt has done for old Mart Blount, who was smaller fry than we were in the beginning. Tell her she's been asked to a palace."

CHAPTER VIII

HIS secretary became a more important figure in Braisted's eyes thenceforth. He studied Ben from a fresh angle as they sorted the mail the next forenoon in Steve's quarters in the House Office Building, and told himself the chap really measured up well alongside other congressional secretaries. He had a rather strong face, had Ben, when you looked him over critically, and there was something very likable in his frank, gentlemanly bearing. He was not to be thought of for a son-in-law, of course—that poppycock was settled—but, after all, he was no bad choice for his present berth. If he was capable of making friends in high places he might prove a useful asset.

"My wife tells me you know Marshall Blount's girl," Braisted threw off, carelessly.

"Yes," said Ben.

"Known her long?"

"Two years."

Braisted waited for details; but Ben went on slitting envelops.

"Two years, eh?" It was annoying to have to pump for information from your own secretary. "Ever meet Blount himself?"

"Yes. Here's your first application for free seed, Mr. Braisted. You'll get so many of these that you'll have to borrow from some city member's quota."

Steve could never be diplomatic long.

"I'll speak to Estabrook about it," he said, impatiently, and returned to the main issue. "How did you get in with the multimillionaire bunch, Ben? I hadn't sized you up as a society butterfly."

"I'm not. Neither is Miss Blount, for that matter. That's why we made friends easily, I think. There is no nonsense about her. She hasn't any more use for loafing than her father has, and everybody knows his caliber."

Steve nodded sagely.

"Regular dynamo, they say. But you started to tell me how you met the Blounts."

"It came about while I was in college. One summer I went up on the Maine coast to visit a friend whose father has a summer home near Kennebunkport. Marshall Blount has a place there, too, you know. I met Philippa at tennis, and got to know her well before the summer was over."

"And Blount—did you get to know him well?"

Ben laughed.

"Not what you'd call chummy. Still, I did see him often, and he was as friendly as you could expect such a man to be with a college boy. He even offered to give me a job some day."

"What!" His employer straightened in his chair. "Marshall Blount offered you a position?"

"Yes. I suspect Philippa put him up to it. She was always asking me what I meant to make of myself. I told Mr. Blount that I intended to study law, and he said to drop around when I had been admitted to the bar."

Braisted's face mirrored a strenuous thought-process.

"Look here, Ben," he said, after a pause, "I don't want to stand in the way of your future. You tie up to that man the first chance you get. Don't let an opportunity like that get by you."

"I never took Mr. Blount's offer seriously."

"Then it's time you did. Get busy. It's a chance in a thousand. I'll find another secretary."

"But I'm not a lawyer yet. I don't take my bar exams till spring."

"Well, nail him in the spring then. Meanwhile keep in touch with the girl. See Blount himself if you can."

"I do call at the school occasionally; but I'm not likely to run across Philippa's father anywhere. He's seldom in Washington, you know."

"Yes, I know. He doesn't need to come. He makes Washington go to him."

"There's something in that."

"There's a whole lot in it. That man's power—" He made a vague, spacious gesture.

"Ben," he went on, trying to speak with unconcern, "I want to meet Marshall Blount sometime, and I'll look to you to fix it up."

"I'll remember that."

Halsey returned to his letters; but Braisted, staring out of the window, reared air-castles that overtopped the great dome across the way.

"Of course, I may meet him through Fern," he added, as if thinking aloud. "Did I mention that she's going to the Blounts' for the holidays?"

"Fern!" Ben's face, no less than his tone, revealed his surprise and disappointment.

"Yes. We'll miss her, naturally; but as I tell her mother, it's part of her education. Doesn't it strike you that way?"

"It depends on what you call education." The words came with difficulty.

Steve decided to give this misguided youth a hint.

"I admit I'm pleased," he continued. "It's done me no end of good to learn that my girl has it in her to make the right sort of friends. I expect big things of Fern."

Ben appeared not to heed.

"It won't seem a real Christmas to Mrs. Braisted," he said. "She has been counting so on having Fern with her."

"Oh, Olive will have S. J. to run about with," replied Braisted, easily. "And she still has a husband."

But it fell out that Olive did not have Steve junior to run about with. At the last moment the boy wired the tremendous news that he had suddenly made the Glee Club, and would accompany that famous organization on tour. They were forlorn holidays for Olive. With the beginning of the congressional recess the Walden suffered as swift a blight as if it had been overtaken by a medieval plague. The lobby was cheery no longer; its once lively rockers gathered dust; the depopulated dining-room became a hall of echoes, curtailed cuisine, and indifferent service. All whose homes were within practicable distance trooped off like children freed from school. The people who remained derived chiefly from the Far West, or were bond slaves of the countless departments of which Olive, guide-book in hand, now took laborious note.

In these researches Stephen Braisted found no leisure to join. His committee assignments were none of them important enough to encroach upon his vacation; but his days and nights seemed as busy as ever. So absorbed was he, in fact, in his own mysterious concerns that it never entered his head till Christmas morning that he had chosen no gift for his wife. As she had purchased his present months before, the lavish check by which he sought to make amends failed to atone for his lapse; but the man saw no hint of her true feeling. Since the night of the dance, self-restraint had been Olive's watch-

word. Yet, in her brooding thoughts, the incident set itself apart as a significant milestone on the uncertain road they were traveling. She could hoodwink herself no longer; their comradeship was a thing of the simpler past.

To the past also, she feared, belonged the tender intimacy which had existed between herself and the children. Let Fern's heart beat ever so true, she could scarcely look upon the old ways with the same eyes. Even if Beauchamp Manor had sown no seeds of unrest, could Tuscarora Falls seem other than humdrum after her taste of life in the stone palace on Fifth Avenue? Automobiles, theaters, the opera, liveried servants, costly foods, luxurious rooms—her kaleidoscopic letters read as if written in a foreign land. As for S. J., his brief scrawls could scarcely be termed letters; but he was prodigal of press-clippings detailing the junket of the Glee Club and the festivities in various cities to which its presence gave rise. She felt as if her son had joined a minstrel troupe.

But for the hour it was not the shifting ideas of her children which most perplexed her. That they should change was a natural fulfilment of the ancient law of growth. Humbly teachable, she, too, hoped to benefit by what Washington offered. The bewildering, even terrifying thing was to behold Steve change without herself keeping step. She perceived that he, ever meeting the larger world, must have been changing

ever since the turn in their fortunes. How else could it have come about that they now had so little in common?

Cast down by such reflections, she was overjoyed when, one afternoon toward the end of the congressional recess, Steve came back in holiday mood and bade her be ready for an evening at the play.

"It seems a dog's age since we saw a show together," he said, "so I decided to do it in style. Put on something fancy. I've taken a box."

Heartened at this sign of awakened consideration, Olive looked forward to the outing with the fervid anticipation which impish fate delights to rebuff. In the same interval Braisted occupied himself with a series of whisky-and-sodas, many strong cigars, and the dictation of several belated business letters, all in the stuffy little den appointed to the hotel stenographer, of whom he was making use during a holiday trip of Ben's to Philadelphia. The upshot of these labors by night was a captious frame of mind which nothing pleased.

Following the precepts of Beauchamp Manor, his wife had achieved a toilet which, if not beautiful, was at least in simple good taste; but Braisted's jaundiced eye saw only that Olive was no sylph, and inspired him to repeat his advice to consult Mrs. Estabrook's wonder-working dressmaker. He harped so long on this topic that it brought relief to have him switch

at last to the shortcomings of the laundry which had mishandled his linen and the criminal blunders of the tailor who last pressed his evening clothes. Dinner he marred by grumbling at the hotel management for its thrifty retrenchments and by a running fire of sarcasm aimed at the luckless black who by some chance served them in their usual waiter's stead. Olive half feared to see the flash of an avenging razor, and only drew normal breath when the meal was over. She diagnosed his case accurately, however, and insisted that they go to the theater afoot, trusting that a walk in the January night would cool his dudgeon. She was not a bigot regarding drink; but it had not escaped her tolerant notice that Stephen Braisted, politician, was a thirstier being than Stephen Braisted, man of business; and the knowledge helped to swell the growing burden of her unrest.

With a beginning so ill-starred, she felt but a listless interest in what might follow; yet, hoping nothing, she was, as a matter of fact, diverted. As usual, when he followed his own bent, Steve had chosen a musical comedy, for no other form of theatrical entertainment, save brisk vaudeville perhaps, could keep him awake; but this time he had pitched on an exceptional musical comedy equipped with a perceptible plot, and with a comedian whose sincerity raised his art to the difficult plane between laughter and tears, which few actors understand and fewer still attain.

The libretto dealt with the old yet ever new theme of suddenly acquired riches; and no inopportune regiment of chorus-girls or lugged-in topical song—the plums of the pudding for Steve—could wholly shatter for Olive the beautiful human illusion of this one man's acting. His half comic, half pathetic emotions again and again matched some experience of her own till it came to seem that he must by some wizardry have read her very thoughts.

She was full of the wonder of it when, as the lights went up after the first act, Steve surprised her by leaning across the rail of the box behind to address some late-comers who had taken their places in the darkness.

"Wearing gum shoes, Hoyt?" he demanded, jovially. "I didn't know we had neighbors at all, let alone you folks. When did you blow into town, Estabrook? And you back, too, Mrs. Estabrook? What's wrong with Old Point, anyhow?"

"Honeymooners," answered the lady, wearily. "The hotel was infested with them."

"Well," prompted Braisted, "what of it?"

"What of it! Evidently you never tried to play serious bridge with a bride and groom."

She leaned past him to address some civility to Olive, whereupon Steve tardily bethought himself to present the Estabrooks' companion to his wife.

"Ollie, this is my friend, Proctor Hoyt, of—"

He hesitated, laughingly. "Where shall I say?"

"Oh, make it the United States," put in Estabrook. "You can't tie a man like Hoyt down to a section."

"Or to a single country," contributed his wife. "He is a citizen of the world."

The young man, if he was a young man, weathered this introduction without embarrassment.

"As a matter of fact, Mrs. Braisted, I'm from Seattle," he said, drawing his chair up to the dividing rail. "Will you let me tell you how proud I am to meet the originator of one of our most famous products? Your husband has given me the real history of the great Braisted industry, you see."

"Anybody could think of a recipe," Olive protested. "It was building up the business that took brains, and the credit of that belongs to Steve."

"Ah, but the womanly inspiration!" He made his tone intimate. "I can't let you make light of that. Who can gauge its power? Not that I undervalue Stephen Braisted's ability for organization. To me it seems genius, positive genius! It stamps him as a leader of men, proves him the peer of the great captains of industry."

Shy of any compliments whatsoever, Olive became dumb before this spouting geyser of

flattery; but Proctor Hoyt did not mind. He could talk for both. When Olive perceived that she was not expected to say anything in reply, she let her mind wander from the magic names of Carnegie and Morgan and Rockefeller to the oracle who, with such superb assurance, put these giants in their place. She now saw that he could scarcely be as young as he had seemed at first. Of undoubted good looks, his most striking feature was a pair of black eyes which gave great animation to a face that otherwise would have been cold. His flashing glance belonged to a boyish idealist; his lower face was that of a man without illusions.

Suddenly he brought up short with a change of tone and topic.

"That's a remarkably pretty girl down there in the sixth row of the orchestra," he was saying. "She is smiling up here as if she knew you."

Olive followed his glance.

"Why, it's my Fern!" she cried. "Look, Steve, look! There's Fern, and Ben with her. What does it mean?"

Braisted scowled through his opera-glasses at the laughing pair.

"It means she's back, that's all. Why didn't she wire?"

"She wanted to surprise us, Steve."

"Sweet child!" said Mrs. Estabrook. "But that secretary of yours, Mr. Braisted, is alto-

gether too young and good-looking for a chaperon. I'd keep an eye on him if I were you."

"I shall," promised Steve, grimly.

"Why not have them up here where we can all keep an eye on them?" suggested Hoyt. "There's plenty of room."

Fern's mother felt a savage desire to throttle both these meddlers, and the immediate darkening of the house for the next act seemed a direct interposition of Providence. She could no longer lose herself in the play, however. Her thoughts were all with the truants down there in the friendly gloom. She must shield them somehow. What might not Steve say to them in his present mood?

But the actual meeting proved her forebodings vain. There were no thunders from Steve. He heard with a sympathetic smile Fern's account of the sudden longing for the society of her family, which had sent her flying to Washington by the first train. He listened amiably while his secretary explained that an equally sudden impulse had prompted him to extend his outing to New York, with the dramatic sequel of a call at the Blounts', and the opportunity to share Fern's homeward journey. No slightest hint did he betray of his conviction that Ben Halsey's call and Fern's flight were cause and effect. And, wonder of wonders, he even by word of mouth approved of their coming to the play when they found the Walden deserted.

"For it gives us all a chance for a jolly little supper," he added, and, tucking Mrs. Estabrook's arm in his, headed the way to a neighboring hotel.

Olive's relief at the turn of affairs was alloyed with a nervous dread of her duties as hostess; but Braisted himself took charge of the impromptu supper-party with an ease that amazed her. He asked Mrs. Estabrook, who sat beside him, one or two questions, and, after a knowing discussion of cookery and vintages with the head waiter, sketched out a meal which, in variety, indigestibility, wastefulness, and general expense, he found compared more than well with any ordered by their fellow-guests among the palms and tinted lights.

Meanwhile the self-possessed Mr. Hoyt devoted himself to a select audience of one. Deftly blocked from Fern's company in the brief walk from the theater, Ben found himself still outgeneraled in the restaurant. Fern might as well have been back in New York for all the pleasure he derived from her society. A huge bowl of roses and Proctor Hoyt shut him most effectually away. Worse yet, Fern seemed quite content with the arrangement. She was only too plainly taken with this new friend of her father's, who put such eloquence into a mere glance.

Like emotions spoiled another appetite. What Proctor Hoyt and the bowl of roses did for poor

Ben Halsey, the bowl of roses and Ada Estabrook did for Olive. Could not Stephen Braisted realize that that ogling woman was making a fool of him? What could Estabrook himself be thinking? Apparently of nothing save the business in hand. He ate as if such rich foods seldom came his way, and by no means neglected the champagne which Steve provided in lavish abundance. There was something animal, it struck her, in his intent, silent feeding. How shiny his evening coat was at the elbows! She noticed that even as she strained her ears to catch what that woman was saying to Steve.

Mrs. Estabrook was talking of her car.

"It's the latest model," she was telling him. "Of course, they allowed us little or nothing for our old one. They're such brigands—these automobile dealers! But, as I said to Dan, it's poor policy here in Washington to—" Some half-hearted small talk from Ben drowned the rest of it.

The party broke up at last, and Olive forgot everything else in dismay at the size of the bill which chanced to pass beneath her eye. The sharp lessons of their years of enforced thrift were graven too deep for her to see anything but criminal waste in paying such an amount for an after-theater supper.

"Forty dollars for a single meal!" she exclaimed, when her husband came finally to bed. "It's a sin, Steve, a wicked sin!"

Braisted, exceeding mellow now, threw back his head and laughed boisterously.

"That wasn't a sin, Ollie," he explained. "It was an investment."

"I can't see it as a joke."

"Who asks you to? Why, that man Hoyt will be worth his weight in gold to me." For a moment he seemed on the point of confiding something momentous, but the impulse died away in a chuckle. "Did you notice how Fern took to him?" he demanded. "I wanted to boot Halsey out of the theater when I first spotted him to-night; but a minute after I knew it was all right. Little Fern is all right, too," he added, with vinous unction. "She isn't going to fumble her hand."

CHAPTER IX

TO these cryptic utterances Olive at the time paid slight heed. A personal problem absorbed her. She was trying to vivisect Mrs. Estabrook. The theater-party had given break-neck speed to the train of thought set carelessly in motion by Steve after the White House call. It was true, as her husband had remarked, that she and Ada Estabrook would tip the scales at about the same unmentionable figure. It was also true, though Steve said nothing about it, that her stock of good looks would stand comparison with the supply bestowed by Nature on this matron whom he so obviously admired. By what magic could she, the lawful object of his adoration, also become a thing of shapely grace?

She was convinced that the difference between them was due to art, and not the art of the tailor merely, and she engaged the lady in many a distasteful conversation in the hope of filching some scrap of the precious lore. Indeed, she even underwent the martyrdom of learning bridge as a means to this end, for Mrs. Estabrook was a devotee of the game; but while she added materially to her teacher's pin-money, she gained

none of the esoteric wisdom she sought, and in desperation came finally to a bold resolve. Rumor said that Ada Estabrook patronized a beauty-doctor. Why should not Olive Braisted employ one of these wizards of modern science? But rumor, like Mrs. Estabrook, failed to specify which particular wizard she favored, and Olive had to choose at haphazard. There was a strong family likeness in the claims and testimonials of the whole profession; but, not caring to discuss the subject with a man, she dismissed the masculine advertisements at once, and after a survey of the still extensive field, pitched upon a certain Madam Sheba because of the engaging frankness of her published face.

She located the consulting-rooms of this personage some days before she could screw her courage to the point of entering. Situated on one of the chief shopping streets, the staircase faced the main entrance of a department store, from which there would surely saunter some one she knew whenever she neared the tell-tale sign and pointing finger that guided seekers of perpetual youth to the miracle-working presence. One wet, gusty morning, however, when the few passers-by were concerned only with their umbrellas, she found the coast clear, and, whipping into the narrow doorway, hurried up the three steep flights which, for hygienic reasons, perhaps, Madam Sheba inflicted on her patrons, and arrived panting before the portal.

Entering a reception-room set about with sculptural examples of ideal feminine beauty, she was greeted by a young woman quite as statuesque as the surrounding casts, and further endowed with a complexion of striking color and texture.

"I came to see Madam Sheba, if she's not engaged," Olive announced.

The goddess looked politely doubtful.

"You haven't an appointment, then?" she asked.

"Why, no. Coming so early in the day, I didn't expect it would matter. I do hope I won't have to go away without seeing her. It wasn't easy for me to come."

"We are always busy," stated the attendant, with a slight air of reproof; "but if you care to wait, I'll see what can be done."

She rustled into majestic retirement behind heavy portières, and after some minutes, presumably devoted to pleading Olive's cause, reappeared with a victorious smile and said that inasmuch as a lady who lived on Dupont Circle had just phoned she could not keep her appointment, a vacant half-hour would presently be available.

"Which is very lucky," she added. "Usually there isn't an opening."

"Is anybody having a consultation now?" asked Olive, suddenly panic-stricken at the thought that somebody she knew, perhaps Mrs.

Estabrook herself, might pop out upon her from the inner mysteries.

"No," said the goddess, confidentially, as a rattle of earthenware issued from beyond. "It's an important chemical experiment that's being tried in the laboratory."

Olive wondered whether the chemical experiment had not something to do with a belated breakfast. There was a faint odor which might be coffee in the air, and she noticed a crumb or two on the attendant's blouse that she thought had not been there before her disappearance; but, reflecting that she had undoubtedly arrived betimes and that even wizards and beauties must eat, she waited her turn in patience. This interval the goddess enlivened with friendly talk upon the Sheba system of treatment.

"Two years ago," she confessed, "I was as stout as you are."

"You don't tell me!"

"Every bit. And I had the same shortness of breath I noticed in you as you came in. I expected to drop of apoplexy any minute. You've probably had that feeling, too?"

"I do get afraid sometimes when I'm in a crowd. But it's different with a girl like you."

The goddess laughed merrily.

"How old do you think I am?" she asked.

The caller gave her a careful scrutiny, which she bore with composure.

"Twenty-five, perhaps," she ventured.

"That's the average guess. What would you say if I told you that I'll never see thirty-eight again?"

Olive stared, and then smiled.

"It wouldn't be polite."

The marvel laughed again.

"Oh, I don't mind," she assured. "Nobody believes me. Nobody will believe, either, that I ever had a wrinkle. If I swore on a stack of Bibles, it would make no difference. People have got in the way of looking for fraud in everything, so I don't bother to argue. I only say, if you're curious, try the Sheba system as I did."

At this juncture a bell tinkled, and the rejuvenated goddess, lifting the curtain, ushered Olive down a dusky passage to the consulting-room, a chamber of such scientific simplicity that, aside from a desk and chairs, its furnishings consisted merely of jars and bottles mounting shelf on shelf to the very ceiling. The breakfast-time odor was here so unmistakable that before taking her departure the attendant humorously alluded to it.

"Whatever your nose tells you, don't think the laboratory beyond is a kitchen," she said. "Our chemist is experimenting with the food values of coffee."

From this inmost retreat, which did look uncommonly like a kitchen to the visitor whose eyes happened to be fixed on the opening door,

there now walked a large, black-haired man whom she took for the chemist till he bade her good morning and seated himself at the desk.

"But I wanted to see Madam Sheba," she explained.

"Madam Sheba is dead," replied the large man, solemnly, "but her system fortunately lives. I am her nephew and successor."

His sad news cut Olive adrift.

"I fully expected to talk to a woman," she wavered, uncertain whether to retreat or stand fast.

The late Madam Sheba's nephew lifted a long, tobacco-stained forefinger and fixed her vagrant attention.

"Who," he asked, with stern gravity, "have been the world's greatest physicians? Men! Who have been the world's greatest scientists? Men! Even Madam Sheba—I say it with all respect—could not have perfected her admirable system without my help. It was merely a theory, a feminine intuition, till I brought my logical masculine faculties to bear upon it. But that is beside the point. What troubles you is the dread of confiding your worries to one who, not being a woman, may not completely sympathize. Well, madam, you need not say a word. I can diagnose your case without it. In a nutshell, you are too fat."

"It's not hard to see that."

"No; not hard to see, but hard to remedy.

To break down the superfluous tissue without breaking down your constitution as well—that is another matter. Now let me point out one or two things which have not occurred to you. Take this glass," he directed, handing her a large magnifying-mirror. "Are you satisfied with what you see?"

"My stars, no!" said Olive, overcome by her imperfections so relentlessly exposed.

"Of course not. Notice your eyes, for example. Wouldn't you rather have them bright and limpid? Our Arethusa Eye Drops will do it. And now observe your complexion."

"I have. It looks as if I were coming down with scarlet fever."

"Exactly. What you really need is to be skinned."

"Skinned!" she shuddered.

"It amounts to that. You seclude yourself for a time, we painlessly remove the imperfect outer cuticle and you re-enter the world with the rose-leaf bloom of an infant."

"I wouldn't hear to it."

The scientist debated with himself for an instant.

"Our Venus Toilet Mask would, of course, be of great service to you," he suggested. "I should strongly advise your using the Juno Chin Strap at the same time."

Olive vetoed this alternative with equal promptness. She did not propose to make herself a nightly laughing-stock for Steve.

"I hoped you would help me without such contrivances," she continued. "Your circular says as much, and that anybody can use the system in their own home."

"So you can. But it will take time which I thought you might not be able to spare from your social duties. I will enroll you for the home course, and give you the first instructions. The entrance fee is twenty-five dollars, payable in advance."

This preliminary complied with, she settled herself to drink in the basic principles of Madam Sheba's renowned discovery. Sifting the swift and often indistinct whirl of words of its exponent, this seemed chiefly to consist in the liberal use of a preparation styled Psyche Skin Food, accompanied by herculean labors of exercise and massage. She was relieved to find that starvation was unnecessary. The man explained that the scheme was above all things rational, and for the present bade her follow her usual diet. For a startled moment she also understood him to urge her to chew sweetmeats between meals; but on inquiry it developed that he had not said "chew" but "eschew." She had now to rehearse for her instructor the exercises which were to occupy her leisure till her return a week later—a feat made doubly difficult by her street dress and the tropical temperature of the scientist's establishment. Thus handicapped, she found his so-called stationary

running particularly laborious. Done at length, however, she purchased three of the ridiculously small but amazingly costly jars of skin-food and a box of an indispensable soap bearing the name of Diana. Their enthusiastic inventor still urged the toilet-mask and the chin-strap; but resisting their blandishments, Olive took her departure with the feeling that her rejuvenation was as good as accomplished.

This optimism lasted for five memorable days, during which, thanks to the joint influence of Diana Soap, Psyche Skin Food, and her own unclassical yet vigorous massage, Olive's countenance took on a glow of such fiery intensity as made her question whether after all she had done wisely in rejecting the Venus Toilet Mask and its attendant chin-strap dedicated to Juno. Certainly they could not have drawn more unflattering comment from Steve, who, in comical ignorance, solemnly advised her to consult a specialist. But if her face shone too ruddily, and every muscle ached, there was compensation in the sharpened appetite she brought to table. The meals seemed days apart.

Doubt first raised its head on the afternoon of the fifth day, when the waistband of a gown she had worn the previous week in comfort now failed to hook at all.

"But something must be caught, Milly," she told the colored maid, whom in Steve's absence

she usually impressed into this service. "Try again while I hold my breath."

Milly battled a minute or two longer.

"No'm, Mis' Braisted," she declared, "I jes' cayn't do it without bustin' either you or the dress. You has suttinly took on flesh."

Olive leaned feebly against her dressing-table.

"Milly!" she exclaimed. "You don't think that?"

"Yas'm."

"But I *ought* to be thinner."

"Yas'm, you'd ought," agreed the maid. "On'y yesterday I heard a lady say so."

"Who?"

"It was Mis' Estabrook."

Olive sank dejectedly into a chair.

"What under the canopy shall I do?" she exclaimed.

"If you're axing me, I'd say see one of them beauty-doctors."

She searched the black face sharply, but no sarcasm was apparent. Milly was all sympathy and seriousness.

"Do you think they amount to shucks?" she asked, skeptically.

"Oh, yas'm. There was a lady here las' winter—Mis' Finch her name was—who could have tol' you."

"Was she stout?"

"Powerful. An' most of it jes' blubber, for

she wa'n't tall. She was more middlin', I should say, like you."

Her listener became engrossed.

"And she got thin?"

"Not skinny, so to speak, but slim to what she was befo' she went to Madam Sheba's."

"She went there!"

"Yes'm. It's on'y a name, though. The doctor's a man."

"You are sure of the place?"

"Oh, yas'm. I know, 'cause she tol' me about it. She'd gen'rally do her 'nastics while I was tidyin' the room."

"What were they like, her gymnastics?"

Milly demonstrated.

"Wall," she said, "I 'member one 'nastic what looked like runnin', on'y she didn't get nowhere. It always made me laff. Then she'd put her hands against the do' an' dip down between 'em till her hayd would touch—that was for the roll of fat on her shoulders. An', oh yes, she got so she could touch her toes an' never bend her knees, which was funny, too, when she done it. I cayn't reckerlect all she done that-away; but when she was through the stand-up 'nastics she'd set down to her dresser an' pinch an' pat an' smooth her face by the hour. She sayd that was for her double chin an' the crow's-feet."

The description rang true. Olive's muscles ached in sympathy.

"Did it make her face red?" she asked.

"Oh, yas'm; for a long spell, but bimeby that went off with the fat."

There was the vital difference. The ponderous unknown had lost weight. The system stood vindicated by its results. Why had not she, too, profited by it? As the maid helped her into a looser dress, however, Milly added a bit of gossip which sapped her faith in the nephew and successor of the late Madam Sheba.

"Mis' Finch sayd she was shore the man was a quack," said the girl. "This doctor, he's got a right smart an' handsome woman in his office to tend do' an' be sociable-like to callers. An' bimeby, while they's settin' there a-waitin', she up an' tells 'em if they want to see what Madam Sheba kin do, why jes' look close at her. If they's slim, she lets on how she got plump. If they's fat, she tells 'em how Madam Sheba made her thin. But what tickle Mis' Finch mos', that girl even sayd she is nigh forty an' used to have wrinkles something dreadful. Pshaw, Mis' Braisted, she's jes' a Baltimo' huzzy what he brung over here to fool folks! A lady frien' of Mis' Finch reckernize her an' sayd she cayn't be a day over twenty-fo' if she's that."

Olive plumbed a new depth of human depravity.

"Yet Mrs. Finch kept on going there?" she exclaimed.

"Yas'm. She on'y laffed an' sayd that,

quack or no quack, she was losin' five pounds a week, an' that was enough for her."

It might have been enough for Olive, but for the crushing testimony of her waistband. Her dream of lissome elegance died hard, however. She even sat herself down once more to the pinching, patting, and smoothing process described by Milly; but at the first movement a sharp ache, leaping from finger-tips to shoulders and from shoulders to back, stabbed her flagging resolution to death.

Now it was, when there seemed nothing for it but to resign herself to shapelessness for life, that a chance remark of Mrs. Tully's solved the riddle.

"For myself," stated the old lady, firmly, as Mrs. Estabrook in full evening effulgence passed by, "for myself, I prefer a corset that leaves my vital organs where Nature intended them to be. You see—"

But thereupon a mere man drifted within earshot, and the explanation ended in a whisper.

CHAPTER X

THAT man chanced to be Proctor Hoyt, who, since the holidays, had formed the habit of spending some part of his evenings at the Walden. He passed Olive's corner with a bow and made for Mrs. Estabrook. This also was something of a habit and might have caused comment but for the fact that, save one, all the men in the Walden gravitated in the same direction. The exception was Mrs. Estabrook's husband.

Hoyt was popular. He had a taking way, an infectious laugh, and the useful social asset of a fine baritone voice; and, whether he dropped into the subterranean den where the bar of this family hotel was concealed or the feminized lobby, there was always some one to make him welcome. He was often Braisted's guest at dinner; but Olive noticed that in public they let fall no sign that they were more than friends. Of what they said to each other in private she had no conception. The tremendous secret was a secret still. The new-comer passed as a promoter; but no one in the Walden knew the precise nature of his business. A man from Seattle might promote anything.

But for an aftermath of the beauty-parlor episode, she would have accepted Steve's estimate of Proctor Hoyt and put their mysterious business out of mind till he should see fit to enlighten her. It happened, however, that it was no easy matter to drop Madam Sheba's acquaintance. At first suave letters on mauve paper reminded her that she had failed to call for further instructions. Disregarding these, she received a curt notification that whether she continued the treatment or not she would be held responsible for the price of the full course. If prompt payment were not made, the account would be placed in the hands of—but Olive, who had learned the formula by heart in the old days, left the rest unread. There was nothing for it but to pay, and she determined to pay in person, and at the same time give either Madam Sheba's nephew or the brazen decoy of the outer office a piece of her mind.

She was robbed of this latter satisfaction, however. A small colored boy guarded the inner mysteries this time, and after several journeys to and fro brought Olive her final receipt from the invisible specialist. It was a long wait, and to beguile it she walked to a window and glanced idly out into the court on which it gave. The rear of the building opposite was commonplace. Through one window she saw a fat man dictating to his stenographer. Through another she glimpsed a dressmaking establishment with a

group of black-garbed sales-girls flattering a customer. In a third a white-jacketed dentist was popping roll after roll of cotton into an unwilling mouth. Then she came upon something less humdrum: a fair-haired manicurist of striking good looks was plying her arts, professional and otherwise, upon a masculine client. The man's face was hidden by a cheap lace curtain; but his hands showed, and, like the woman's, were eloquent. It was all as graphic as a moving picture, and Olive watched for the dénouement as if she were in a theater. Finally one of the masculine arms made a bold, possessive sweep, and the blond head, with a facility that suggested practice, nestled into the hollow of the sturdy shoulder that now came abruptly into the scene. At this pass Olive remembered that this was not a public performance; but before she could turn away her eyes the male actor in the pantomime identified himself unmistakably as Proctor Hoyt.

She kept what she had seen to herself. Steve would merely laugh and tell her that Hoyt's love affairs were his own business. So they were, for that matter; but she felt that he would bear watching and sharpened her vision accordingly.

Meanwhile the season, the prime events of which were admired rather than shared by the Walden coterie, wheeled its gay cycle toward Lent, and the great Presidential receptions, which

the Walden by right official or unofficial hook or crook usually did attend, passed into social history. To the surprise of her friends, Olive did not present herself at the White House.

"But you don't know what you miss," remonstrated Mrs. Tully. "First and last, I've been to the White House in all kinds of ways, from luncheons and dinners to musicales and egg-rollings; but for downright enjoyment give me one of the popular receptions. Each of the four has its special points; but I think I prefer the congressional night, when the homespun people, of whom I am one, turn out in largest number. I refuse all short cuts. I wouldn't miss a step of the long march up through the basement to the front corridor, where the band plays, and so round by the various rooms to the last little door where they pop you past the President as if you had been blown out of a peashooter. If they ever go, how the embassy critics must hug themselves! Democracy making believe it's at court is America's most diverting sight."

Olive always found some excuse for staying away, however. The memory of her early blunder was too bitter to admit of a return, even though she went with a multitude. Fern not only took her place for the particular spectacle which rejoiced the satiric Mrs. Tully, but with a privileged handful from Beauchamp Manor attended one of the later functions where uni-

forms were more frequent and the throng, as she said to Olive, was less promiscuous.

"But Miss Abercrombie doesn't think highly of such affairs," she added. "She doesn't care to know many politicians. Her friends are mainly old Washingtonians, the set they call the Cave Dwellers, who are something like the real Knickerbockers in New York. Excepting a few families, they're not very well off; but they think they're the salt of the earth. Yet Philippa Blount says that the diplomatic crowd laugh at them as they do at the rest of us."

Olive recalled Mrs. Tully's allusion to these superior observers.

"What business have they to poke fun at us?" she demanded. "I don't call that diplomatic."

"Oh, I don't know," said Fern, vaguely. "I presume we seem different and queer. I should like to know some of them well enough to find out."

"I shouldn't," her mother retorted. "I don't want to know anybody who thinks my country is a joke."

Fern smiled at her warmth.

"What if it is a joke?"

Olive regarded her with stern reproof.

"If you're learning such things at Beauchamp Manor," she rebuked, sharply, "I think it's high time we took you out."

Fern promptly changed front.

"I only said 'if,'" she protested.

Olive pursued the topic no further; but it made her thoughtful as she drove homeward, and remained a thorn in her natural optimism for many days. It had never occurred to her that some critics might look with contempt on America. The text-books of her simple schooling and Independence Day oratory had entrenched her in the belief that this was in all things the land of lands, the most favored nation, which every other nation held in awe. Something was always being exposed in the newspapers, to be sure; but she had looked upon these noisy purifications as symptoms of general good health rather than of wide-spread depravity. Were we in sober truth a by-word among the peoples of the earth?

Oddly enough, it was Ada Estabrook's husband who restored her faith in the greatness of the republic. Of the real personality of this man Olive had learned little. She knew, of course, that he had failed of re-election, and had heard the common report that during his political activities his law practice had dwindled to the vanishing-point. In the slang of the day quoted by Mrs. Tully, he was a "lame duck," and the reason of it, phrased in the same strange language of current politics, appeared to be that, while his district had become "insurgent," he had unluckily remained "stand-pat."

So quiet, even so colorless a figure was he in the life of the hotel that Olive was astonished

to find him among the Representatives of spell-binding repute, who made brief addresses in the lobby the night of Washington's Birthday. Yet he was the one man who struck a note of sincerity. Unlike the others, he did not wave the flag, he told no humorous stories. Perhaps the fact that March fourth would end his congressional career sobered him. He was as serious as a prophet, and, like a prophet, voiced old and often forgotten truths. He preached the doctrine that this democracy is real; that, since it is real, the common no less than the fine, the ignorant as well as the wise, must find expression; and that humanity should rejoice because of it. Art there unquestionably was in his oratory; but transcending art there throbbed a dynamic faith in the national destiny which stirred his speech-hardened audience to the heart.

"And to think that such a man is wasted on Ada Estabrook!" exclaimed Mrs. Tully, wiping her eyes. "It's a crime deserving capital punishment; and just at this moment I think I could execute her myself."

Olive had not exchanged a dozen words with Estabrook since the night of the theater-party; but now, while his message still moved her, she told him that he had made her ashamed of her backsliding.

"But perhaps Washington isn't just the place to make us feel patriotic," she added.

"You're right," he agreed. "It isn't the place

yet. It's as unfinished ethically as it is architecturally. The fine and the base rub shoulders just as the splendid new buildings neighbor the hovels. But we'll be proud of it all some day, never fear."

Each saw the other from a new viewpoint that night, and a quiet friendship sprang up between them, for, when the old Congress died and the new came together in special session, Estabrook secured a berth of some sort in the Land Office. He was a shrewd judge of men—so shrewd that she marveled how he could have so blundered with women when it came to picking a wife. She wanted very much to know what he thought of Proctor Hoyt, who had usurped her place in Steve's confidence; but Estabrook seemed shy of the subject. She had supposed him a warm friend of Hoyt's when she saw them together at the theater, but latterly they were never in each other's company. Could it be that Estabrook resented Hoyt's attentions to his wife? Surely not. If he took offense on that score the quarrel would extend to the whole male population, blacks excepted, sheltered by the Walden roof. Even Steve would be in the ranks of the enemy! Whereupon the impish thought struck her that she had not seen her husband and Estabrook together these many days. Why was it? Why? Then she thrust the wretched doubt from her. What was there about this place that put such

notions in her head? She had never been possessed by demons like these in Tuscarora.

Her mind often went back to Tuscarora as the spring advanced, and her favorite day-dream had for background the spotless kitchen of her new house, where she would in mouth-watering fancy evolve tin on tin of the particular soda-biscuits for which, all Washington's fleshpots notwithstanding, she now sighed in vain. Those simple joys of the past! To cook some beloved dish with her own hands, to potter in the mold of a new-made garden, to saunter down a country lane when the orchards were in bloom, to talk with her children at twilight—these and like fancies lured with a poetry and sweetness never quite realized in actual life. The fact that only one of these dreams could come true in the near future raised her anticipation of the Easter holidays to an extravagant pitch. Whatever else lacked, she should again enjoy the dear companionship of the children.

Fern figured oftenest in these thoughts. S. J. claimed an equal share of her love; but she realized that as a boy he must inevitably grow away from her, and she borrowed no trouble from the vagaries of his ever more masculine point of view. With the girl it was far different. To lose touch with Fern would rob life of half its sweetness. Yet, in her inmost heart, she had to admit that nowadays she could not always understand her daughter. This vague

alarm, joined to her knowledge of his devotion, caused her to divine that Ben Halsey was troubled too. He was ever seeking her out for little talks in which Fern's name constantly recurred, and she was not surprised when one day he blurted out an avowal of his love and doubt.

"I don't know what you'll think of me, Mrs. Braisted," he said, "but it can't be anything worse than I've called myself. I've all along felt like a hound to deceive you, and it's reached a point where I must make a clean breast of things. The fact is, months ago I asked Fern to marry me, and she promised that she would. Now you know the truth, and I feel a lot better for it. Before I sleep I'll have it out with Mr. Braisted, too."

Olive had never liked him more. If he had not won her sympathy before, his sturdy manliness now would have made her his partisan; but she prudently let her manner speak more than her words.

"I am glad you came to me first," she said, "for I must ask you to say nothing to Fern's father."

"What, never! I thought surely I'd find you on my side."

"I am on Fern's side, first of all, and if you care for her in the right way you'll think of her first yourself."

He readily granted the justice of this view.

"Of course, I'm not good enough for her," he

added, humbly. "Nobody is; but she seemed to care for me, and that being so, I—I thought—"

"I should want my girl to follow her heart," said Olive, as he paused dejectedly.

His face brightened.

"I can't ask anything more than that."

"But you are both too young to think of marrying. You have your way to make, and she is a chit of a school-girl with no more idea of what life means than a kitten."

The lover shook his head in emphatic dissent.

"I see that even you don't know how wise Fern is—why, she told me almost that very thing herself! For all her promise, she said I must not consider it an engagement while she's in school, or expect any—" he hesitated, blushing—"any of the usual—"

"Yes, that was sensible," agreed Olive, coming to the rescue. "There's the possibility that one or both of you might change."

She expected a stout denial; but none came.

"That's just what troubles me," Ben admitted, soberly. "There is no danger of my changing; but Fern, meeting the people she does— Oh, well, it may be all in my imagination. It's hard not to see her oftener. I haven't had a real talk with her since that night we surprised you at the theater. I'd like to call at the school now and then; but she wrote me that Miss Abercrombie would probably object."

"Miss Abercrombie objects to a great many things."

"That's true enough. But she has never minded my calling on Philippa Blount. I've sent my card up to Philippa two or three times since Christmas in the hope of getting a glimpse of Fern, too; but it was no use."

"Did Fern know?"

"I suppose so. Philippa would naturally mention it. Once I was tempted to make a confidante of her; but I thought better of it. She's a brick, Philippa; but I doubt if she'd care to be told that it was really Fern I came to see."

"I doubt it, too," smiled Olive. "As for Fern, I've seen her only a few times myself lately, and it was always at the school. She says Miss Abercrombie doesn't like to have her come to us for over Sunday. It breaks into her studies. It's the same way with parties. I've let Fern know every time there was to be a dance here, but she thought she'd better not ask permission to come."

"The Beauchamp Manor girls go to concerts and the theaters," said Ben. "I've several times seen Fern's name mentioned in box parties, and twice she's been on the White House reception-lists."

"Those things are part of her education."

"What they call education at her school."

Olive bent an anxious look upon him, fearful lest he confirm her own misgivings.

"What do you mean, Ben?"

"I mean they're snobs at Beauchamp Manor, and put wrong ideas in the girls' heads. When it comes to teaching them to look down on their own people I think it's time to call a halt. Now, I asked Fern if she wasn't coming to any more of the Walden dances, and what do you think she said? That they weren't good form!"

"I don't suppose they can be called fashionable." Olive could think of no other defense.

"She meant common," he declared, bringing out the word as if he bore it a grudge. "She said a girl met nobody here but Congressmen's secretaries and department clerks. Would Fern have thought of that herself? I don't believe it. It has Beauchamp Manor branded all over it. That's the kind of thing that worries me."

It worried Olive; but she put a cheerful face on her anxiety. Surely no harm had been done Fern that a few days at Eastertime with her family would not correct.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN the time came, Nature, at least, did her best to speed the holiday. Easter fell quite in the lap of that spring glory which is Washington's boast. In all the little squares and circles of the town the inevitable generals on horseback did their warlike posturing to billowing masses of tender green leafage, shot here and there by the rose-pink of almonds or the creamy foam of magnolias. But this was only a tithe of the riches which April lavished. From the Capitol to the Monument, from the river to the hills, from casement, terrace, door-yard, lawn and park flashed the gorgeous early blooms.

In apparel which vied with the splendor of the season came S. J., a college man, in his own proud phrase, but to average vision very much of a boy still. In features and complexion he was singularly like his father, whom from infancy he had admired and copied till Stephen Braisted saw his very smile reproduced. This hero-worship had amused his parents at first; but of late years Olive, though still diverted by the lad's mimicry, grew fearful lest he end by

turning actor, while Steve, too often reminded of his responsibilities as a model of manly virtue, found the rôle more irksome than humorous. Both, therefore, perceived with lively interest that their son had begun to develop a personality of his own.

The outward signs of this efflorescence were at first view startling. They had gone together to meet his train, and were still straining their eyes up the platform when a shambling figure, clad in vivid tweeds, whom they had merely noticed as the assiduous attendant of a white bulldog, now brought up before Olive and presented his unfamiliar face for her salute.

"Why, S. J.!" she exclaimed. "You've gone and grown a mustache!"

"Good for you, mother," he returned. "The fellows have tried to make me think they couldn't even see it with a microscope. How'dy, father? Let me introduce you to Eli Yale. Eli, show the folks what you think of Johnny Harvard."

Thus enjoined, the bulldog bared his fangs with a deep growl which made Olive cry out in alarm.

"Isn't he a wonder?" demanded the grinning owner. "I picked him up at a bargain on our Christmas tour. Prize dog, too, at the last New York show! The Glee Club made a mascot of him, and fed him so many fool things I had to take him to a veterinary."

"That angel face will look better in a muzzle

while it's down here," said Braisted, who had prudently backed out of biting radius. "I know *I* don't want any damage suits. You're getting stoop-shouldered, my boy," he added, taking critical note of his son's loose-jointed progress toward the carriage. "Don't stick your nose too close to the books."

The collegian blushed and modified his carefully acquired slouch a trifle.

"I have had to grind a bit lately," he replied.

As they rolled away from the station, Braisted, with a gesture of proprietorship, waved his hand toward the great dome closing the vista.

"The Capitol, my son. The wing on the right contains the House."

S. J. dismissed the marvel with a nod.

"Why don't you get into the Senate, father?" he demanded. "That's what counts, you know."

"So I've heard," said Braisted, dryly. "I suppose, too, you would cut a wider swath as a Senator's son?"

"Sure. That's what I had in mind. Anybody can be a Representative. Prod him up, mother," he urged. "He could land the senatorship if he tried. Think of the dash you and sis could make then! But you'd have to smarten up a bit," he added, critically. "Why, you would look ten years younger in a Paris hat."

"That's right," chimed in Braisted. "I tell her she can't do things in a one-horse way in

this town; but I might as well talk to the wind. Somehow your mother can't grasp the fact that she's out of Tuscarora County."

S. J. perceived by his mother's face that this was a sore point, and promptly dealt a blow in behalf of the weaker side.

"If you did but know it," he told his father, "you've got some hayseed left in your own hair. That waistcoat of yours is cut backwoods style, sure enough. It's low enough to go with a dinner jacket."

While grateful for his championship, Olive deemed his manner lacking in filial respect and reproved him; but Steve brushed aside her protest with a laugh.

"I guess I can take a joke now and then," he retorted; but his enjoyment of the jest did not seem excessive. "When it comes to shying stones," he countered, "it strikes me, youngster, that you're living in a pretty middling glass house yourself. Barring horse-blankets, I haven't seen anything quite like that suit of yours."

"No, you wouldn't be apt to," returned his son, calmly. "It's very exclusive. It came from one of the big London tailors who sends over a man twice a year for orders."

His parents felt rather at a loss for topics of conversation with a personage who held such advanced views on clothes and betrayed no marked interest in the capital of his country, though he had never seen it before; but S. J.

cheerfully took the lead himself and discussed the vital topic of his college world, the fitness of the crew, till Braisted interrupted a detailed criticism of the peerless eight with a word to the coachman.

"It was your mother's plan to drive straight out to Beauchamp Manor and pick up your sister, for her vacation begins to-day," he explained; "but we didn't count on a seatful of dog. If Fern is to get in, Eli must pile out. He'll be safe enough at the hotel."

S. J. looked anxious.

"They won't go and feed him, I hope? The vet said I must be mighty particular about his diet."

"Don't you worry that he'll get any free meals in these parts. Cash on delivery is the motto of this town. Nobody will pamper Eli till they've seen the color of your money." He looked wonderingly after the youth as S. J., still concerned for the dog's welfare, followed the porter into the hotel. "So that's what a little dose of college can do!" he commented, with a short laugh. "Good name for 'em—freshmen!"

"The nonsense will wear off," declared Olive, confidently. "He's a good boy."

"I certainly hope that suit of his will wear off," grunted Braisted. "To have his son parade a John Bull get-up like that makes a good protectionist look cheap."

The mother smiled to herself, for beneath the

bluster she read his great pride. Should the lad ever go seriously amiss, Steve's indulgence would probably outrun her own. Indeed, his present patience exceeded hers, for, as the minutes lapsed and S. J. still lingered within, she began to fear that Fern would give them up and take measures of her own to reach the Walden.

"You don't seem very anxious to see your sister," she said, in mild reproof, when he finally appeared.

"Oh, I shall have old Fern all the week," he replied, easily. "I wish you had been inside to see that dog with his sporting blood up. He sighted the hotel cat, and it took three bell-hops to hold him."

Steve groaned.

"Now Eli will be popular," he prophesied. "That cat has a pedigree like a lord, and is the pride of the house."

"I knew she had breeding," said S. J., delighted to find his judgment confirmed. "You could tell that by the way she held her ground. It just tantalized Eli half to death to have us interfere. He appreciates pluck wherever he sees it."

"Well," put in his father, "to quit the subject of a dog, what do you think of my new horses?"

"Yours?" He craned to look them over.

"They'd ought to be. I paid enough."

"Carriage too?"

"Yes. At first I arranged with a livery to take your mother round on this continuous performance circuit that the women have for getting rid of calling-cards. Then, one day lately, I saw these bays spanking along the river-drive, and I made up my mind right there and then that I wanted them What do you think?"

"Waste of good money. You ought to have bought an automobile. Who wants to jog along after horseflesh these days?"

"I do, for one," said Olive. "I like the old way better."

As if her opinion decided him, Braisted at once took sides with his son.

"I've no old fogy ideas about it," he declared. "I'm broad-gauge enough to appreciate horses and motors both, and maybe we'll have both before long."

S. J. took him up excitedly and volleyed questions; but his father chose to make a mystery of his intentions.

"You'll all be wiser before sundown," he hinted.

They went indoors at Beauchamp Manor that S. J. might see the place; but, like the Capitol, it failed to astonish him. Fern, whom it had once overawed, now exhibited the "hall" and other wonders with indifference.

"It's all very well in its way," she said, languidly, "but nobody wants to be taught

something at every turn. Abby makes us feel that everything is here for an edifying purpose. She couldn't rub it in more if she used labels. Now for the real atmosphere, you ought to see Philippa Blount's home in New York. Why, her father brought over whole ceilings from a Venetian palace! I'm sorry, S. J., that Abby herself is out. She's such a freak."

"You hadn't ought to speak so of your principal," remonstrated her mother, though secretly relieved that Miss Abercrombie had toppled from her pedestal.

"And you ought not to say 'hadn't ought,' mother."

Braisted gave a loud laugh.

"She had you there, Ollie," he said. "Your grammar does need tinkering. I've often noticed it since we've lived here where folks are particular."

"You made the same break yourself when you were talking horse a while ago," put in S. J., with rigorous justice. "Let's get out of this. I've had enough school. Aren't you ready yet, Fernie?"

His sister drew herself up.

"I don't care to be called Fernie," she instructed. "Fern is bad enough."

"Oh, come off, Fernie!" he scoffed. "You're only a kid."

When they rejoined the carriage under the feudal porte-cochère, Braisted gave a whispered direction to the coachman.

"I have something I want to show you all, something I've saved special for to-day," he vouchsafed. "Now don't pester me with questions," he added. "It will speak for itself."

"Perhaps it's a parrot," hazarded S. J., facetiously.

"Or a phonograph," contributed Fern; "but I hope not. The most ordinary people buy such things nowadays. I wish you would give away the one we have in Tuscarora Falls."

"Listen to her!" invited her brother. "She used to make it grind away by the hour."

Fern met his levity with lofty tolerance.

"My taste has changed in many things," she stated. "Yours will, too, as your mind develops."

"Gee!" he ejaculated. "You talk like Methuselah's grandmother. Has your taste changed about Ben Halsey? You were pretty sweet on him before I left home last fall."

The effect of this jocose inquiry astonished him. His father scowled, his mother became grave, his sister turned scarlet, and for a painful little interval embarrassed silence blanketed the group. At last Olive found her voice.

"You've picked up a bad habit of teasing, S. J.," she admonished, with a diplomatic evasion of the real issue. "Of course, Fern's ideas have changed in some ways. That's what she's in school for. I wish I'd had her opportunities when I was her age."

S. J. dropped the discussion with despatch and tried to conciliate his sister with tales of Eli's cleverness until his eye, which, without appearing to notice anything, saw much, suggested another topic.

"You seem to know a good-sized bunch of people here," he remarked. "Most of the way out it kept my hat bobbing, and now we've headed back it looks like the same story."

Braisted was highly gratified.

"We are pretty well known between us," he assented. "The folks we met driving were mainly your mother's calling crowd; but all those men you saw down-town bowed to me. It keeps me guessing to remember everybody; but Halsey has been a lot of help. I wish I had his knack of fitting names to faces. Of course, people can place me right away by the relish. Why, the other day a Senator told me that my face was as well known to the country as the President's."

"That reminds me," said S. J. "I wish you would take your face off the relish labels."

"So do I," seconded Fern. "It's most embarrassing sometimes."

"I don't see what difference it can make to you," returned her brother; "but it's a confounded nuisance where I am concerned. If father and I didn't look alike, it wouldn't matter; but we do, and the fellows saw it at once."

"Well, what of it?" asked Braisted, with heat.

"What ails my face? What's my business to your rah-rah friends? Are you ashamed of the money that pays the fiddler? Because, if you are, I want to serve notice right here—"

"Of course he isn't, Steve," Olive interfered. "Let S. J. have his say out."

But the youth found his eloquence frozen at the fount.

"It isn't pleasant to be called 'Pickles' and 'Imperial Braisted'—that's all," he concluded, lamely.

"Humph!" said Braisted, and, turning on his daughter, demanded: "What's your complaint?"

Daunted by the violence of the storm, Fern blushed to find herself cross-examined; but the strength of her convictions bolstered her courage.

"It's common, father," she replied, quietly. "That's the simple truth. I used to think it was fine to see your picture on the label and in the advertisements everywhere; but I know better now. It's mainly vulgar quacks who advertise their faces—patent-medicine frauds and the like. Why should you want to be classed with them?"

Her unimpassioned argument sobered Braisted.

"I hadn't thought of that side of it," he conceded. "Anyhow, using my picture was your mother's idea."

"That's right! Pile it on mother!" cried S. J.,

who saw Olive wince at this ungenerous choice of scapegoat. "She made you plaster it on all the bill-boards, too, I dare say?"

"Shut up!" roared his father. "I've had enough of your lip."

And so, with no cheerful face among them save the coachman's, they came to Stephen Braisted's great surprise.

CHAPTER XII

THEY had swung round to the high northwest, once fields where the untried armies of the Union lay encamped, and now, entering a street of varied architecture and evident wealth, turned sharply in at a gateway that gave to the untutored eye slight hint of its cost. The stone and iron barrier, of which this and a twin entrance formed a part, succeeded by the aid of cleverly disposed shrubbery in lending an air of seclusion to a house that in reality hugged the street.

"Hello!" called S. J., delighted to escape from the encircling gloom. "Whose palace is this?"

"It's the Colburn house," explained Fern, plucking up heart. "Our fine-arts teacher mentioned it in class only yesterday."

Her father's austerity relaxed.

"What did your teacher say?"

"She called it the best example of Italian Renaissance in Washington. Are we going in? I thought all the family were away?"

"So they are, what's left of them," he answered, helping them dismount.

Olive stared wide-eyed as her husband drew a key from his pocket.

"What is it, Steve?" she asked. "Why are we here?"

Braisted chuckled, and, unlocking the heavy outer door, crossed a short vestibule, and, with a sweeping gesture, introduced them to an atrium of many white columns and a commanding white staircase which swept upward with fine dignity into a gallery surrounding the entire chamber. Antique stone benches, supported by griffins, stood on either hand; classic statuary gleamed from pedestal and niche; and, in the very center of the mosaic court beneath a bronze lantern of Florentine workmanship depending from the lofty ceiling, a great Venus Genetrix queened it as if the place were her temple. Measured by every-day standards, the house seemed enormous, and when the heavy door clanged shut behind them it woke an echo which Olive, now guessing the truth, felt beat upon her heart.

"Steve!" she faltered, facing him wildly, "what *have* you done?"

"Bought a home," he said. "Pretty snug little cabin, don't you think?"

It fell to S. J. to break the dazed silence, and his words voiced Olive's dismay as accurately as if her own lips had spoken.

"A home!" he ejaculated. "It looks like a public library!"

"That's what I like about it," asserted the man, eagerly. "It isn't like a million other houses; it's got style; it makes a man respect himself to think he owns it. Why shouldn't we live in a tiptop way, I want to know, if we have the dollars to make good?"

"But *can* we afford it, Steve?" Olive, weak-kneed with excitement, sank upon one of the stone seats. "When I remember how poor we were, and what a tiny sum we thought would be riches if we could lay hands on it, I get afraid."

"It doesn't affect me that way. It only makes me smile to think what a gump I was in those days. A cent looked bigger than a dollar does now. But fire away, Olive. Get all this fever and ague out of your system at once."

"I don't mean the money alone," she said. "Maybe I'm old-fashioned, Steve, but I doubt if we can be as honest and God-fearing in this grand place as we were when we had to eat off the kitchen table. I doubt if we'll be as happy."

"But you simply won't let yourself be happy. That's what ails you, Olive. It's been a constant fight for me all winter long to drag you out of the old rut. What's the use of our money if we haven't the ambition to live differently than we did."

"It's living wisely, I mean."

"That's what I mean, too. I'm not such a

saphead as to spend beyond my income. And if we can afford to live like the best, I say do it."

"So do I, father," agreed Fern. "Let's see the rest of the house. So far I think it's splendid."

"That's the talk. I'm glad to find one member of the family who appreciates what I'm trying to do. Why, I thought when I brought you into this place and told you it was yours, it would make you jump out of your skins."

"Oh, it suits me," said S. J., recovering his native bounce. "Don't think I'm kicking because your plain marble trimmings aren't alabaster. I dare say you did the best you could."

"And I think it's fine, too, Steve," assured his wife, sorry now for his disappointment. "It took my breath away, that's all."

Restraining the children, who were eager to explore, the now appeased master of the house delayed to point out the superior way in which the wonder had been wrought.

"Expense was simply no object to Lawrence Colburn," he explained. "If the particular kind of stone he fancied was only quarried abroad, no matter; that was the article he would have. And it was the same story from start to finish. The house was his hobby, and he rode it to death. He sank a fortune in it—a fortune! But don't think for a minute I'm paying his price," he threw in, with a shrewd smile. "Not much. The property is worth an

easy forty thousand more than I gave for it, and the neighborhood is on the boom. Even if I hadn't wanted to use it myself, I'd have bought. As an investment it's gilt-edged. Maybe you never heard Colburn's history?"

"I know he died lately," said Fern.

"Yes; shot himself in a New York hotel. I'll come to that part by and by. To begin with, the Colburns belong to the Old Washingtonian mossbacks who think God Almighty made 'em of a special kind of mud. Grand-daddy Colburn—his name was Lawrence, too—was one of those high-stepping Federalist office-holders that Andrew Jackson kicked out of their jobs. He had put by for a rainy day, however, and owned a house a little this side of the Capitol, and a farm that took in this very land we're standing on now. Lawrence number two was a lawyer who rolled up a tidy little sum in government contracts when the Civil War broke out. He was counted a rich man for those days, and cut quite a dash with race-horses and blooded stock. The old house in town—it's a tailor-shop now—he let go, for the neighborhood went to seed soon after the war, and as the live stock were his main interest, he moved out here and built the old farm-house over into a sightly country residence. Well, he lived to be an old man, rising eighty, and Lawrence number three —young Larry, they called him till he had gray hair—didn't lay hands on the wherewithal till

pretty recent times. His first move was to cut the farm into building lots and sell dear by the front foot what had been bought cheap by the acre. It didn't take any brains. The city simply grew this way while he was loafing around Europe waiting for his father to pass in his checks. But he got the notion that he was a financier, and began to monkey with the stock-market. He had greenhorn's luck at first, and on the strength of his easy money he built this house and fitted it up with stuff he and his wife had been picking up everywhere for years. I hear he lived here just one winter, and hit up the pace as if he controlled South African diamonds or Standard Oil. Then his wife and daughter piked for foreign parts to spend the hot weather, and he, either to kill time or make up for the winter's drain, took another plunge in Wall Street, and wound himself up short and sharp. Being as proud as the drum-major of a nigger band, he couldn't stand the sight of the mess he'd made of things and suicided, as I said at first. The property stood in his wife's name; but she up and sold it for the sake of the creditors. She hadn't much business gumption in her make-up. She didn't advertise the place, or put it on the market sensibly; just grabbed at the offer I made through a real-estate friend who tipped me off."

"Poor thing!" exclaimed Olive. "Was it right to give her so little?"

Braisted laughed.

"You're a weathervane for consistency. A while ago you were at me hammer and tongs because you were afraid I'd paid too much. Now it's not enough. How is a fellow to please you?"

"Perhaps Mrs. Colburn would have turned the extra money over to the Wall Street sharks," suggested S. J.

"Exactly. The gang who fleeced her husband would have got my good money. That's what decided me to offer the low price I did."

"Are you sure?" pressed Olive.

"Nothing is more certain. Mrs. Colburn had a little cash in her own right, and that's what she'll live on somewhere across the water. She considered this house her husband's, and the proceeds his creditors'—a fool idea, of course; but she would have it so. My check seemed to blister her fingers till she could fork it over to them. I know what I'm talking about, for when the voucher came back it told the story. She indorsed it over to those swindlers at once. Whether she'll feel bound to do the same by the furniture is beyond my guess."

Fern clapped her hands.

"Father!" she exclaimed. "Can we buy that, too?"

"If we want their second-hand stuff. I've got a thirty-day option on the whole lot; whether we buy or not depends on you women-folks. If

we don't invest," he added, reflectively, "I suppose I'll have to hunt up some other figgers for this hall. It seems to need knickknacks of that kind. Isn't that so, Fern? You're up on art."

"Oh, do let's keep these," she begged. "They're beautiful. You like them, mother, don't you?"

"Yes; they're pretty," assented Olive, half-heartedly. "I wish they had more clothes; but it don't seem the fashion to put them on statues nowadays."

"But these aren't new-fashioned," explained the girl. "They are copies of famous works by the Greeks, who certainly knew what they were about. You surely wouldn't want them to look like those frock-coated horrors in Statuary Hall up at the Capitol?"

"So you've been there already!" said her mother. "That was one of the sights I counted on showing you and S. J. this week. I must say I didn't see anything horrible about Statuary Hall," she went on, feeling that ridicule of the statues in some way reflected upon the patriotic originals.

"No more did I," protested Braisted, who had proudly exhibited these offerings of the States to visiting constituents. "I call some of them right clever What ails them, professor?"

Fern floundered, finding her memory treacherous.

"I couldn't begin to tell you now in detail,"

she answered. "Our fine-arts teacher said the display was a disgrace to the country. You see, there's hardly anything dignified or—or graceful about them. If one happens to be good, the next piece of trash spoils its effect. Not one of them inspires you like these."

"Well, anyhow, this particular consignment is of Carrara marble, and cost a pot of money," Braisted ended the discussion. "Let's don't camp here in the hall all day. There are a few other things to talk over besides Larry Colburn, and whether these stone ladies should wear petticoats and stays. Come along and see the balance of the premises. It isn't all entrance, by a long shot."

This was no idle boast. A structure which would have fitted without discord into the landscape of Tuscany or Rome, it conveyed an absolutely fresh and dream-like experience to Olive. By aid of fresco, carving and tapestry, old paintings, old books, old furniture, and the miscellaneous store of twenty years' chaffer with venders of the spoil of dead centuries, Lawrence Colburn, third of his name, had created an illusion of the Italy which in his heart of hearts he had infinitely preferred to the land of his birth. Yet, when all was said—and to catalogue what was beautiful was to say much—it was still an illusion. Within and without, the fundamental stones of the house were innocent of the mellow touch of time; the candid freshness of

the Western world enveloped all; beyond the tranquil outlook, with its inspiring dome that had reminded the nomad of the Eternal City, teemed, pulsed, and roared the great experiment America.

Steve, who had led his brood to a loggia at the rear to enjoy the full glory of this prospect which he recklessly pitted against any civic view in the world, now bespoke their wonder for the grounds just beneath.

"First off," he said, "I couldn't make out why he put his house so close to the street; but the minute I set foot on this balcony I understood. It lifted him high enough on the slope to overlook the tree-tops, and it gave him space for this neat backyard effect that sort of leads up to the view of the town. That's what they call a sunken garden, I'm told. Just wait here a moment while I see if the caretaker is about. I'll have him turn on the waterworks for you. It's a nice sight."

They noted a sun-dial as they waited, and in little recesses in the greenery curious marble figures, their bodies growing from their pedestals, which the learned Fern said were satyrs and fauns. At either end of the white basin of water, toward which all the formal little paths converged, there sported, shell at mouth, a Triton; and when the releasing mechanism was found, these droll creatures blew at each other great streams that interlaced and glittered in the slanting sunlight.

"I consider that fountain alone worth the price of admission," said Braisted, rejoining them indoors at the foot of the monumental staircase. "It's patterned after something foreign."

"Like everything else on the ranch," observed S. J. "Don't talk to me about English clothes. The only American thing about your whole place is the plumbing! But it's all right, father. I'll come and live with you if only for the sake of the billiard-room on the top floor. I speak for the suite of rooms adjoining, if nobody else has staked out a claim."

"I've picked mine," said Fern.

"Well?" demanded her father, highly pleased that the children took so eagerly to the new house.

"I'd like the rooms near S. J.'s. I mean those done in yellow and white — my school colors."

"So! Well, you're the one to please. I thought maybe you would hit on the quarters Colburn fitted up for his daughter. They're the rooms with the view of the city and the sunken bath. Sunken bath, sunken garden, sunken fortune! That man couldn't get away from the word! But to come to a vote," he broke off, with a final survey of the still marble deities which had an air of listening to his words, "do or don't we buy these images and the rest of the furniture?"

The children chorused "yes," and their father called the decision unanimous. It did not occur to him to question Olive. Nor did she herself give the matter a thought. She could as yet confront the edifice only as a colossal whole.

CHAPTER XIII

AS the Braisteds neared the Walden, an automobile with a woman at the steering-wheel overtook and passed them.

"Flossy little car, that!" said S. J., admiringly. "Stunning woman, too. Why, she's waving to us! Another swell friend of yours, father?"

The question nettled Braisted.

"Your mother knows Mrs. Estabrook as well as I do," he replied, testily.

S. J. turned an inquiring grin at his mother, but another matter absorbed her thoughts. Mrs. Estabrook's companion was Proctor Hoyt. She stole a sidelong glance at Fern and felt her heart sink. The girl had whipped out a vanity-box and was powdering her pretty nose against the coming meeting.

The pair awaited them at the curb, and Mrs. Estabrook, after beaming impressively on all, directed a shaft of special radiance at Steve.

"Are my lips unsealed?" she queried, archly.

Braisted looked foolish.

"Of course," he assented, awkwardly. "The cat is out of the bag now."

Mrs. Estabrook extended both hands to Olive.

"Then, my dear Lady of the House Beautiful," she cried, "accept my congratulations. It will be a treasured memory that I had a share in your husband's princely surprise."

Olive submitted wonderingly to these greetings.

"I don't understand," she said, turning to Steve.

"I asked Mrs. Estabrook's advice about the Colburn place," he explained, growing red.

"And mine," added Hoyt. "He mistrusted his own sound judgment. He asked us to tell him if it was a home really worthy of his family." He dropped Olive's passive hand for Fern's fluttering clasp, and ran a swiftly appraising eye over the collegian. "I would have known you for Stephen Braisted's son anywhere," he asserted. "The likeness is astonishing."

The youth rounded on his father.

"Do you hear that?" he demanded, bitterly. "That's what they all hand out to me. If you don't change the relish label I'll change my name."

Steve's temper had well-nigh slipped its easy leash, and he opened his lips for caustic repartee. Then, taking thought, he deferred S. J.'s annihilation, and, inviting Hoyt to dinner instead, bore him away, to Fern's chagrin, for a preliminary cocktail at the subterranean bar.

"Who is this man Hoyt?" S. J. asked his mother, as the group scattered.

"A new friend of Steve's."

"I'll bet he's a four-flusher. Who's his running mate?"

"I wish you wouldn't talk slang. Half the time I don't understand you. She isn't his wife, if that's what you mean. Mrs. Estabrook is another of Steve's friends."

S. J. laughed.

"I saw at the kick-off that she was no pal of yours," he said. "You certainly handed her the glare frappé when the governor owned up that he had shown her through the shack ahead of the family. He meant all right, though."

"Of course he meant all right," she rebuked, sharply, for she thought him too observant by far. "Your father can't be expected to see things from a woman's point of view."

"I should say not. The chaps who know it all about women's feelings have a screw loose somewhere, and, so far as I can see, they're popular with nobody. But me for a visit to Eli Yale," he broke off. "Eli's limited flow of language has a restful charm sometimes."

The new house was the chief topic at dinner, and Olive began to realize what this amazing caprice of Steve's might portend. Proctor Hoyt made it concrete for her. He was one of those men who see everything in terms of dollars, and in Braisted he had a greedy listener. Steve loved dollar-talk, and he chuckled happily when

his guest assured him that he had secured the one real bargain in Washington real estate.

"Six months hence you could turn it over for twice the purchase price," Hoyt predicted.

Fern took alarm.

"But you won't, father?" she protested.

"No; he won't," Hoyt answered for him. "He's too shrewd. In the back of his head he's thinking of the unearned increment—"

"Hip, hip!" broke in S. J., joyously. "I know what that highbrow dope means. My room-mate is boning pol. econ. But I'll bet it's a new one on father."

"Stevie!" reproved his mother. "Don't be rude."

Braisted took her up.

"What was rude about that, Olive? I'm not so thin-skinned as to begrudge another man a compliment at my expense. I haven't had Hoyt's advantages," he added, humbly. "I never hear him talk without envying him his education."

Hoyt navigated the awkward turn gracefully.

"You are the one I envy," he said. "Everything you touch turns to gold. But, as I started to say, you see clearly that that property must grow more valuable. Look at your neighbors! The people who have built or are building all around you are not the common garden variety of millionaires. They're multimillionaires. More than that, they're leaders of society, the cream of New York and Boston and Chicago

and Cincinnati and everywhere else. They're the people who are making Washington the social as well as the political capital of the United States. That's where you've located, Mr. Braisted. You have moved up to your proper place among the elect."

Steve tried to look unconscious of his grandeur, and beckoned the waiter.

"Bring another bottle of champagne," he ordered. "Bring two bottles."

Fern, her gray eyes aglow, began to ply this eloquent prophet of Mammon with questions; and he, doubly inspired by his auditor and theme, launched into a description of a dinner with which one of these lords of the earth had astonished Washington.

"They served it on gold plate," he said, "and every course was the last word in French cuisine. The flowers came from Florida, and the fruits from California by special express. New York furnished the orchestra—one of the finest—and it played behind a great screen of American Beauty roses. This was winter, remember! The place-cards were the work of celebrated artists—each a little masterpiece—and with the dessert came jewels for every guest. Then, as a climax, they opened a floral globe that hung above the table and released a flock of songbirds. It was a dinner that would have made even an imperial Roman stare. It cost thousands, thousands!"

"Were you there?" asked S. J., blandly.

For an instant Hoyt lost his self-possession. Then he shook his head and smiled.

"Only in spirit," he admitted. "I read about it in a stray newspaper that somehow found its way up to my camp on the Yukon."

"What silly remarks you make, S. J.," cried Fern, impatiently.

Olive thought otherwise. To her S. J., of them all, seemed the only one who retained something of sanity in this reign of unreason. Yet even he was willing to break lifelong ties. His air-castles scorned western New York as a background. Tuscarora County shrank to a mere base of supplies, a springboard for the leap into the higher political ether which he urged upon his father, and which Steve, with the attitude of one who knows more than he tells, smilingly conceded might in time engage his serious thoughts.

"But I have something bigger on hand just now," he hinted. "Something that makes everything else look small. Eh, Hoyt?"

Hoyt nodded, but kept his lips locked.

"Can't you swing this deal and go in for big politics, too?" questioned S. J.

"I dare say I could," said Braisted; "but I don't intend to try. Other matters must take a back seat till I put this thing over."

"Is it a secret?"

Braisted exchanged a knowing smile with Hoyt.

"Every big affair is put through on the quiet," he said, guardedly. "Now don't neglect your college course figuring how to make me a United States Senator or a foreign ambassador, my boy," he added, laughingly. "And trust me not to lose touch with New York State because I've taken a flier in Washington real estate. The house in Tuscarora Falls will make a nice change for us summers."

Fern made a wry face.

"I can't bear Tuscarora Falls," she declared. "Need we go back this summer? I should think if father ran out now and then to look after the business it would be enough."

Steve was secretly of the same opinion; but he felt that it scarcely became him to admit it.

"It will be time enough to make vacation plans when we know how long this special session of the new Congress is likely to last," he said. "There's talk that we may be kept here half the summer."

Fern brightened at this possibility.

"That would make Tuscarora Falls quite out of the question," she decided. "We would stay here with you till June and then go to the seashore. Washington is impossible after June. Everybody says so."

"Nice prospect you're mapping out for me!" exclaimed her father.

"But you could come and see us every week-end. Couldn't he, mother?"

"If your father is kept here I shall stay with him," announced Olive, who, even in the domestic atmosphere of the Walden, had divined some of the pitfalls spread for unattached Congressmen.

"Even in hot weather?"

"Certainly."

"I wouldn't ask it of you, Ollie," assured her husband.

"You wouldn't have to ask me, Steve."

Olive left the table in low spirits. Fern's worldly selfishness and Steve's readiness to do without her were not the immediate cause. They were but symptoms of ills, long since noted, that she had been telling herself a return to normal life would remedy. Yet now, at a stroke, she faced the probability that they would never go back to the old order of things. What, for all its bravery of white paint and green blinds, did the Tuscarora Falls house signify beside Steve's great palace! But as yet her mind framed no very clear conception of life in the new house. What depressed her now beyond everything else was the widening gulf between herself and those she held most dear. Her son, indeed, seemed at heart unchanged; but his tastes chimed with his father's rather than with hers; and though, in rough boy-fashion, he might sympathize with her alarms, she knew that he could scarcely understand them. It was her daughter, her second self, who should see things

with her eyes. Yet, of them all, Fern was most perverse.

It cheered her a little to see Fern kind to Ben Halsey, who dropped in after dinner. If this idyl had not lost its sweetness, surely the blemishes which pained her were of the surface only. But she assumed too much from Fern's graciousness. In her present mood the girl had to chatter of the great news to some one, and Steve had borne Hoyt away for a tiresome conference.

Yet Ben, poor dupe, was content, and Olive, in desperate optimism, took elaborate pains that their window-nook in the red parlor should be unmolested. To this fond artifice S. J. gave unwitting aid. Seating himself at the piano, he began the rag-time favorite of the hour, and his audience soon taxed the capacity of the room. He had a voice of uncommon charm, and an entire lack of self-consciousness in the dramatic little touches with which he illustrated his meaning; but Olive grew restive as he passed from song to song. She rejoiced in the seclusion that numbers gave the pair in the window-seat; but she could not rid herself of the idea that there was something cheap in this public minstrelsy, and was relieved when her son finally admitted that he had sung himself out. S. J. was by no means at the end of his social resources, however. With the facile adaptability that Steve called mixing, he forthwith made

friends with those who chanced nearest, and vanished from his mother's view.

With his disappearance Olive herself became a center of interest, not only as the mother of the musical prodigy and Fern, whose increasing prettiness and style had attracted the dining-room, but in her personal capacity as future mistress of the Colburn house. Painful secrecy being no longer necessary, Mrs. Estabrook had spread the news of Steve Braisted's purchase with the thoroughness of a town-crier. Foremost in the gratulatory chorus, properly, was the first official lady of the Walden.

"Perhaps you have not considered the matter yet," said Mrs. Pratt, "but you will reside in what is essentially a Thursday neighborhood."

She enunciated every word so distinctly that Olive felt she ought to understand; but, as she had thus far viewed her new home only as a species of nightmare, Harriet Pratt's meaning eluded her utterly.

"No, it hadn't entered my head," she admitted, hoping soon to learn what it was that she had not thought.

A thin-lipped yet gratified smile softened the face of the social arbiter.

"It occurred to me at once," she returned. "The minute I heard where you were going—it was Mrs. Tully who mentioned it as she passed our table at dinner—I said, 'Mrs. Braisted is moving into a Thursday neighborhood. She

ought, by all means, to adopt the senatorial day.'"

Light penetrated Olive's darkness.

"I'd clean forgotten that I must go on receiving after I leave the Walden," she confessed. "That task has always seemed to belong with the hotel."

Mrs. Pratt solemnly wagged her head.

"How much more does it belong with the dignity of a noble private home!" she said. "Had I been in your place, it would have been my first thought. With me the social duties are paramount to everything except religion. But, as to changing your day, I hope you will see fit to conform to local custom?"

Olive thought the matter hardly deserved so much ado; but she good-naturedly humored the woman in her hobby.

"Of course, you ought to know what is expected of me," she said.

"In all modesty, I don't think there are many in Washington who know the social code better."

"Then you can probably tell me how to get rid of the calling nuisance. Even now I don't get time to turn around comfortably, and when I have that great house on my hands, I don't see how I can possibly go it as I have this season. If Lent hadn't eased things a mite, I should certainly have collapsed."

Her auditor stiffened.

"Oh, if you intend dropping the people who

have tried to make Washington pleasant for you—" She completed her meaning with a shrug of her spare shoulders.

Olive was keenly distressed.

"Now what makes you think I would do such a mean trick as that?" she asked. "It isn't friends I want to be rid of! Why, the Walden people seem like home folks to me now. Will it make it any easier for them to come and see me if I take Thursday instead of Tuesday?"

"Unquestionably."

"Then I will, of course."

Mrs. Pratt's austerity thawed at once.

"A wise decision," she said. "These unwritten laws have always a sound reason at core.

She did not expound the underlying wisdom of this particular law which Olive had promised to observe, but old Mrs. Tully furnished a sufficient commentary.

"To be sure, it's more convenient," she smiled; "but that wasn't the main point with Harriet Pratt. She was pumping you, my dear."

"Why should she?"

"To find out how you stand toward the Walden crowd."

"But I want to see them all. I told her so."

"Then you'll be more popular than ever," prophesied her friend. "Why, there are people here who would give the price of a ticket to grand opera for a peep inside your new art museum."

Olive's face grew sober.

"Museum—that's just the name for it."

The old lady gave her cheery laugh.

"Look on the funny side of it," she counseled. "There surely must be a funny side to keeping house in a museum."

CHAPTER XIV

A QUIET Easter with the children! Olive sorrowfully put that dream away. The tame pleasures she had planned were not for these sophisticated young persons who had usurped the places of the boy and girl to whom her lightest wish had once been law, her poor opinion the last word of perfect wisdom in all things. Now, by some topsyturvy dispensation, it was these changelings who sat in the seat of judgment and with godlike confidence ruled, not their own lives merely, but the hitherto misguided courses of their parents.

It was usually Fern who served as mouthpiece for these mandates. Her brother, having Eli Yale's diet and other collegiate interests on his mind, could not give more than a casual attention to domestic affairs; but his offhand assent to his sister's dicta carried more weight than downright argument with Steve, who overruled Olive's objections till she ceased to protest at all and drifted helplessly with the stream. Because Fern had seen how things were done in Marshall Blount's great house on Fifth Avenue, it was properly her ideas as to servants and the

general conduct of life in the new home which should prevail; and because it suited Fern best to step directly from Beauchamp Manor to a setting of equal dignity when Miss Abercrombie should presently send her forth, a finished social product, it was decided that they should take early possession. That this might mean a gift of no small sum to the proprietor of the hotel, with whom they had arranged for the special session, Braisted waved aside as a trifle. Cherishing vast dreams, the grand manner was becoming habitual.

Of Olive's fond holiday projects, one, indeed, saw fulfillment of a sort. The national shrine at Mount Vernon had long beckoned; but near as it lay she had not yet gone to it. Thwarted by the calling nuisance in the mild days of early winter, she had latterly postponed the visit that she might share it with the children. It had loomed a splendid climax to her Eastertide programme, and, after much thumbing of guidebooks and earnest meditation upon the Father of his Country and his times, she had framed a definite notion of the way one should conduct such a pilgrimage. This theory she set forth one luncheon hour, when, following some wearing days of shops, tailors, theaters, restaurants, and other urban excitements, she found to her delight that Mount Vernon was not included in the large category of things which her offspring pronounced impossible.

"I never took to the idea of going there by trolley," she explained. "It seems a kind of desecration. As for the steamboat, that is almost too modern; but I'd be willing to come back by it, for it's about the only way to see the river Washington loved."

Braisted suspended a stalk of asparagus in air while he stared at her.

"You do beat the Dutch for queer notions, Olive," he declared. "Don't you suppose the General would have used the trolley or the steamboat if there had been any?"

"But there wasn't," she answered, triumphantly, "and that's why I want to follow his steps in his own way."

"That was probably on horseback," said Fern, who deemed the discussion academic, but was willing to shed light from her abundance. "You weren't thinking of trying that, surely?"

Her sally drew a laugh from Braisted.

"Let's hope not!" he exclaimed. "Your mother has changed some in the waistline since I last saw her on a horse."

Olive resolutely took no offense.

"It would be queer if I hadn't," she said, "for that was long before I was married. But I was thinking of driving. Washington must have had to use a carriage sometimes."

"At any rate, Martha did," consoled S. J. "The double chin in her portraits proves it.

"Well," he added, exchanging a look with his father, "shall we take it in?"

"Want my company?" asked Braisted.

Olive looked up in glad surprise.

"Of course, Steve. I didn't suppose that you could spare the time."

He glanced again at S. J. with a glimmer of a smile.

"It may not take as long as you think," he returned. "Be ready at two o'clock sharp. I don't expect I can scare up an eighteenth-century coach at such short notice; but I'll find something on wheels that will hold the Braisted family and cover the ground."

Olive spent the brief interval left her after luncheon with her guide-book. She would have liked to carry the volume with her; but she had gathered that Fern, who now counted herself a Washingtonian, regarded a guide-book as a badge of disgrace. She thought she could rely on her memory for the main points, however, and even looked to astonish the family a little by her knowledge of the historic way. She doubted if they knew where Nellie Custis was born, or General Braddock had encamped, or just what part the old town of Alexandria had played.

S. J. ended these reflections by joining her accompanied by Eli Yale, whose forbidding face still remained a barrier to friendship.

"But he moped all day yesterday," he argued,

as she shrank from the dog's affable advances, and suggested that he be left behind. "I'm dead sure some of the colored boys have been feeding him trash. Don't back away, mother. He really likes you, and is wiggling all over trying to say so. Shake hands, old boy."

Eli civilly put up his paw; but Olive saw only the shining tusks and the undershot jaw.

"I'm afraid of him," she owned. "I can't help it."

Fern ridiculed her alarm, and fearlessly pulled the animal's mutilated ears.

"You shall sit by me, Eli," she promised. "I think you're sweet."

Then a hall-boy told them that Braisted was waiting, and Olive went forth. Three or four vehicles stood before the hotel—a cab or two, a victoria, and a huge canary-colored automobile afflicted with a gigantic form of asthma. Steve, half enveloped in smoke, seemed as deeply interested as the chauffeur in the creature's struggles; but it did not occur to her that his concern was more than casual till S. J. called to his father, who, rising now to his full height, revealed a motoring costume of the latest pattern.

"Here's your chariot, Ollie," he hailed her. "It isn't quite of the revolutionary period, but you'll find it comfortable. Seven people can ride in it and never touch elbows. S. J. and I have been doing a little shopping on our own

hook this week, and I'm free to say I think we struck a bargain."

"You don't mean it's ours," cried Fern.

"I'll show you the receipt if you doubt my word. Hop in, Olive, and take that corner seat. Did you ever snuggle down to anything that could beat it? It's a pity George Washington couldn't have lived to take his Mount Vernon trips this way. We intended to let you and Fern into the secret this afternoon, anyhow, and give you a run in Virginia, so your proposition came pat. The minute you said Mount Vernon I decided we'd do it on the way. Something has gone wrong with the ignition, but we'll have that fixed in a jiffy. Victor, this is Mrs. Braisted," he added, as the chauffeur came and rummaged some mysterious recess for a needed tool.

The man touched his cap and went deftly about his work. A moment later the monster left off coughing, and settled down to a regular rhythmic throb, the chauffeur climbed into his seat, touched some releasing lever, and Olive plunged forward on her pilgrimage.

For some little time thereafter she quite forgot the historical reflections which should edify the way. Taken unawares by the sudden start, the united claims of a disordered bonnet and an aching neck absorbed her mind to the exclusion of everything else except the fact that Eli Yale, scorning the place assigned him on

the floor, did his utmost to drape himself over her lap. By and by, her injuries nursed and Eli subdued, she opened her eyes to the wider impressions of the journey, which now struck her as a chain of hairbreadth escapes from disaster. Nursemaids with perambulators, grocer-boys with carts, negro children playing marbles, cats stalking the sparrows, dogs in hordes, men and women of every age and station, all seemed bent on a helter-skelter game with Death in the teeth of their honking advance. Or again, it was themselves, the foolhardy aggressors, who faced peril of life or limb. Repeatedly some looming van or street-car or solid wall threatened to end their folly; but always the madman at the wheel swerved miraculously by and on toward new dangers.

Presently, the asphalt left behind, she heard, as in a dream, Steve say that now there was no reason why they should crawl, and the demon mechanism leaped forward at wilder speed before the last word left his lips. Then, for an interval, they whirled in the sandstorm left by another car; but, the road widening, they passed the upstarts and smothered them with their flying wake of red Virginia soil. A kind of brute triumph in the superior force which literally made their enemy bite the dust stirred them all; and the bulldog, as if he, too, sensed it, sprang up with a deep-throated growl and had to be cuffed into silence. Then, shortly, the car came

to a stop, and Steve called, "All out for Mount Vernon."

Olive thought him joking and kept her seat while the others dismounted.

"But we're not there!" she cried, as they waited for her to follow. "We can't be!"

Braisted laid a proud hand on his new toy. "You'd hardly think it, would you? But Victor says we'll do better yet."

With a rush the historic landmarks trooped into recollection.

"But the Yorktown road, and the Custis House, and Alexandria, where so much happened! We surely can't have passed Alexandria?"

"That was where Eli had his ears boxed," S. J. informed her. "But let's hustle along for a look at the house. We've got to cover a good-sized slice of the Old Dominion before dinner."

Hustle was the word. The noble view from the piazza; the homely details of colonial housekeeping in the kitchen, with its great fireplace and obsolete crane; the garden, with its box-wood hedges and old-time fragrance; the ponderous key of the Bastille—Lafayette's gift—that greeted one in the hall; Washington's own flute lying on Nellie Custis's harpsichord in the music-room; the low-ceiled south bedroom, furnished as he knew it, where the master of the house breathed his last—these and countless other things, of which Olive caught frantic glimpses, had each its story over which she would fain

linger; but Steve, haunted by the miles which, as a self-respecting motorist, he must cover before night, did his sight-seeing watch in hand, and kept her close upon the heels of the pace-making second generation, who, finding few words save "stuffy" and "queer" to voice their impressions, raced up-stairs and down, galloped from garden to tomb, and were heading full tilt for the automobile when Fern spied a friend at the top of the slope.

"Why, it's Philippa!" she cried, waving to the girl, who flourished a riding-crop in return and awaited their approach.

Braisted, who had never met her, eyed Marshall Blount's daughter with the keenest interest.

"Slim as a young Indian," he commented. "Why isn't she in New York for her vacation, Fern?"

"Because her father is in Washington."

"Blount in Washington! The papers have him playing golf at Lakewood."

"The papers seldom know where he really is," explained Fern, importantly. "Philippa told me all about it. He often uses other names to get privacy. They even have to cross the ocean incognito."

"Think of that now!" Steve's eyes narrowed. "That sort of straw shows how the wind blows. Did she say how long he's to be in town and where he's staying?"

His questions were lost amid the sound and fury of school-girl greetings. They kissed as if they had not met in years, and Braisted, the introductions over, stood swelling with pride that such tender intimacy should exist between his child and a daughter of Marshall Blount. What a trump this little girl of his was!

"If you'd only mentioned Mount Vernon when I saw you downtown yesterday," Fern was saying, "we could have come together. Come to think of it, though, I knew nothing about our new auto then."

"We'd have been proud to have you along, Miss Blount," assured Steve, eagerly. "It's one of the best machines money can buy."

Philippa smilingly shook her head.

"Even an aeroplane couldn't have tempted me to-day," she said. "I am carrying out a plan that I have saved expressly for this vacation when I knew the country would be looking its best. And I've had a beautiful time!"

"By your lonesome!" exclaimed S. J.

His tone made her laugh.

"By myself, certainly; but I haven't been lonesome. You see, I didn't want to do Mount Vernon in an up-to-date way. It is one of the few things around Washington that doesn't look brand-new, and I thought I'd try and recapture some of the old-time flavor by coming on horseback and dawdling along the way just as I pleased."

"Why, that was my wife's idea!" said Braisted, now perceiving strange beauties in Olive's plan.

"Was it?" She turned, eagerly. "Then you would have enjoyed my day, Mrs. Braisted. I've been since morning getting here, and there's nothing I've missed on the way. Why, as I sat in Washington's pew in the old church back there in Alexandria, I even saw a baby baptized, who, the sexton said, was a far-away relation of the General himself! That mite did more than anything else to make the past real to me. After that I poked about the dear little town to my heart's content and ended by lunching at the old hotel where Washington had his headquarters. *Now* I'm here, and here I mean to stop till they put me off the grounds."

Olive sighed enviously.

"I wish I could," she said. "We've really seen nothing."

"Then why don't you stay with me, Mrs. Braisted? We'll see everything from the doormat to the roof."

Thus fanned, the spirit of revolt smoldering in Olive's breast flamed forth.

"Rush over as much of the United States as you want to before dinner," she told her astonished family. "I'm going back by boat."

CHAPTER XV

STILL more unexpected was the outcome of that afternoon with the daughter of millions. As Olive at last turned her steps toward the boat-landing, the girl drew her to a seat overlooking the quiet river, and said that she wanted advice.

"You!" smiled Olive. "What help could a plain body like me be to you?"

"I hope I'm a plain body, too," said Philippa. "At least I try to be. But for the advice, while it isn't about me, it's for me. I want a certain thing, and you must decide whether it is right for me to have it."

"Don't ask me to do that. I make too sad a mess of my own affairs to want to run other folks'."

"But this is your affair, too. You are the only one who can decide. I'd like to take Fern away with me when school closes."

"Take her away!"

"To California, I mean. Father has to inspect one of the Western roads in which he is interested. Possibly we'll run up to Alaska, too. Father isn't sure yet; but, at any rate,

it means a trip of several weeks, and he has asked me to bring Fern along. I've said nothing to her about it. Perhaps I sha'n't mention it at all. It depends altogether on you."

Olive caught her breath.

"I can't let her go," she protested. "I just can't."

"You'd like to have her see California, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, sometime; but not now. You mustn't think I'm ungrateful—"

"There is no question of gratitude. My father is frankly selfish about it. Fern amused him at Christmastime. He is a jaded man to whom everything is an old story. He has sucked his orange dry. But he can whip up his early sensations at times if there is some one along with a fresh pair of eyes. Fern would work her passage, you see."

Her blunt explanation left Olive staring. So this was what life meant to Marshall Blount! The newspapers had gossiped endlessly of the man, and chronicled with untiring zest that all his money had not availed to cure his deafness or rid him of dyspepsia; but this pitiful detail from his own child's lips gave a sinister touch to the portrait. A fierce unreasoning instinct to shield her own from this evil blight swept over her and hardened her heart against this strange girl, who, open-eyed, would for her own pleasure expose Fern to contamination.

"Isn't my girl's head turned already?" she broke out, passionately. "The old ways aren't good enough for her now. Her mother can't do or say anything right. I've cried over it; I've prayed over it; I've done my best to scour off the country rust and see things according to her light; but it's no use. We're drifting apart every day, and now you're asking me to send her three thousand miles farther off with people—" She checked herself in sudden realization of the lengths whither she was being hurried.

"With people who, you believe, would make her worse?"

Olive dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Forgive me," she entreated. "Something broke—I had to speak out. I don't know what you'll think of me."

"Far better than you think of us," said the girl, with a faint smile. "It's a curious experience to have some one distrust me."

Olive's hands went out to her.

"I'd have a black heart not to trust you, dearie. This very afternoon ought to have made me hold my tongue. Money hasn't spoiled you."

Philippa flushed under her dark skin.

"You couldn't say a thing I'd rather hear. But, if you really mean it, why not let Fern come with us this summer? She'll have a tremendous object-lesson."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I mean just this. She still thinks money can do anything. The thing she needs most is to find out what it can't buy, and I don't know any better way than to study my family."

"It didn't cure her at Christmas," said Olive, after a moment's thought. "It made her worse."

"Yes; I know. That's another reason for trying again."

"Do you mean you tried then?"

The girl nodded.

"But there wasn't time," she said. "She saw only enough to dazzle her. I'd like to sicken and disgust her, make her hate Mammon-worship as I hate it." And with a swift cut of her riding-crop Marshall Blount's daughter beheaded a dandelion as if its gold symbolized the false god with whom her spirit was at war. Then, meeting her companion's puzzled gaze, she broke into wholesome laughter. "Do you think I'm queer?" she asked. "My people stare at me like that sometimes. But I don't often storm. It's a waste of force. The best weapon is ridicule, I've found. Of course, that's a trite discovery; but it seemed wonderfully fresh to me when I first hit on it. But what are you thinking about me?"

"I was trying to guess your age."

"I am nineteen. Don't I look it?"

"No; but just now you seem nineteen and as many years more."

"Yes," she assented, gravely. "I was born old. That is some people's beastly luck. My sister was born young, like Fern, and she's stayed young. She'll never grow up, in fact. It almost seems as if the money had stunted her brain. She's older than I by fifteen years, and she knew, as I don't except by hearsay, what life was like with us before the golden flood. I don't mean that, as a family, we were ever poor; father fought his battle with poverty as a boy; but we were simple, I'm told, and I imagine happy. The golden flood!" she repeated. "It's only that by poetic license. In reality it's black, a flood of pitch, and you know, 'He that toucheth pitch shall be defiled!' Such things as have come out of that asphalt lake down near the equator! Lies, dishonor, misery, bloodshed, crime—God knows what not! Sometimes I think—but this can't interest you. As I was saying, the money ruined Maud. We haven't any mother, you know, and Maud's governesses were never the right sort. She was all for show and glitter, and she got everything on that principle from her hat-pins to her husband. Naturally it didn't work well in picking a husband, and in the end she had to divorce him. Wouldn't you think that would have cured her?"

"Indeed I should, poor girl!"

"It didn't. The poison is in her blood. I don't mean that she still cares for that man—

she couldn't; but she goes on caring for the cheap things of life. But I won't talk about her any more. I can't make her over. I can only try to avoid her blunders."

"It's safe to say you will never fall into her mistake about a husband, my dear."

The warm color poured back into the girl's face.

"No," she said, slowly. "I'll marry a real man or none."

Afterward Olive wondered at herself that she had not read the meaning of that telltale flush; but at the moment she was too intent on Fern's affairs to reflect that this girl without a mother might be groping toward happiness along a lonely and difficult way.

The boat whistled a long note of warning, and she rose to go.

"Your plan may be the right one," she said, "but I can't decide now. Mayn't I think it over?"

"Of course. And, if you choose, you need not decide till the last minute. We shall have the private car whether Fern comes with us or not. That sounds plutocratic enough, doesn't it? Father is one of the directors of the line, and they toady to us all as if we were of royal blood. It makes me ashamed to have a fellow being fawn and crawl to lick my hand. It seems an insult to humanity."

She stood erect and confident against her

leafy background as she waved a last good-by from the turn of the path, a being of flame-like spirit and vision-seeing eyes who dominated Olive's thoughts during the tranquil journey home by river. Philippa's invitation she thrust away into a far corner of her mind, trusting with blind optimism that in some simpler fashion all would work out for the best. The salient, inspiring fact was this girl's spiritual isolation amid her flesh and blood. It was a heartening thing to feel that one who was neither rustic nor middle-aged shared her protest. If this favorite of fortune, who from the cradle had known the meaning of vast wealth, believed it a curse, then she did well to question whither she and hers were bound. Money and still more money was the undoubted object of Steve's mysterious commerce with Proctor Hoyt. Had he not declared that this man would be worth his weight in gold to him?

Who was he? What precious secret did he possess? The situation now bristled with questions that had merely slumbered before. Then, hard on her awakening distrust, as if he divined her antipathy and had come to justify himself, appeared the man himself. A half-superstitious shiver crisped her flesh as the big yellow car clamored up to the hotel just as she arrived, and first of all disgorged Proctor Hoyt.

"We nearly ran Hoyt down as we crossed F Street," called Braisted, facetiously. "The

least I could do was to bring him home to dinner."

"You shouldn't make a joke of it, father," protested Fern. "It was really a close call."

Hoyt saluted Olive, and with too elaborate courtesy helped his champion alight.

"It was all my own fault," he said; "I had no business to be building air-castles on that crowded street-crossing."

His words were more for Fern than the others, and he contrived to invest his confession of day-dreaming with romantic interest. The girl's cheek went a deeper pink, and her manner took on unconscious coquetry.

"But you're limping," she cried. "We did strike you!"

"I merely turned my ankle, that's all."

"You say that to spare our feelings. I'm so sorry."

S. J.'s cheery face puckered into a comical burlesque of her solicitude.

"I've some prime liniment that the vet gave me for Eli," he offered.

Fern winced and flashed a look of withering rebuke; but Braisted gave vent to a ringing laugh that cleared the atmosphere and even worked a curative spell. Hoyt's limp was less pronounced, Olive noticed, as they entered the house. Had it been a pretense to work upon Fern's sympathies, she wondered? An intuition, an instinct, something quite outside rea-

son, warned her that the whole fiber of this man was shot with deceit, and she feared him. But this fear no longer centered upon his dealing with Steve; whatever it was, that business suggested nothing malign. It was Fern that mattered now—Fern flattered, excited, attracted by this adventurer, even as that too kind manicurist she had seen in his arms. Then, as if they were all puppets in the hands of an unseen dramatist, chance threw Ben Halsey in their way, and, as the absorbed girl passed him like a stranger, Olive fancied she saw in his startled eyes a reflection of her own acute dismay.

As she dressed for dinner she tried to subordinate feeling to reason and calmly ask herself of what she stood in dread. After all, nothing had happened. Was her child a fool that she should fancy her infatuated with a man she scarcely knew?

Two minutes with Fern sufficed to revive all her fears. Entering her room without knocking, she surprised the girl in absorbed self-analysis before the mirror.

"I sha'n't motor often if my face is always going to flush like this," she declared. "I look a fright to-night."

"Yes," said her mother, judiciously, "your cheeks are too red."

"Red!" Fern took another long look. "I don't know that I'd call them red, exactly; but

they are certainly pinker than usual. And aren't my eyes bright?"

They undoubtedly were. The excitement that dyed her cheek had lent a starry softness to her eyes that Olive had not seen there since the night she avowed her adamantine purpose to marry Ben Halsey.

"Don't gaze at yourself like that," she broke out, harshly. "It looks silly. And why under the sun did you put on that frock?"

Fern started at her sudden severity.

"Why, mother, what's come over you?" she exclaimed. "Don't you want me to look nice?"

"I don't want you to look overdressed. Here at the Walden people don't get themselves up in low-neck gowns for an ordinary dinner."

The girl flicked life into a dejected ruffle.

"But we have a guest."

"What of it? You're not prinking for that Proctor Hoyt's benefit, I hope? He's just a business friend of your father."

"Mr. Hoyt doesn't seem like a business man. He has imagination, the creative touch, just as Mrs. Estabrook says."

Olive doubted her ears.

"Who?" she demanded.

"Mrs. Estabrook. It was through her that I have come really to know him."

"You've been seeing him at other places besides the Walden?"

"Oh, often," said Fern, candidly. "And

even before I met him at the theater that night I had seen him and wondered who he was. Most of the girls wondered, for that matter. He's so distinguished! He used to take walks by the school, you see. One day, when I was playing tennis in the court nearest the street, who should come along with him but Mrs. Estabrook. Since then I've run across him several times."

Olive groped blindly in the forest of doubts thus suddenly disclosed. Why had not Ada Estabrook, who chattered of everything, mentioned this meeting? Why, for that matter, were she and Hoyt strolling the city's outskirts? Above everything, what did all this signify to Fern?

She had a partial answer soon when Steve put his head in at the door to announce that Hoyt had received an urgent telephone message and could not dine with them after all. Always flower-like in her suggestion, the girl seemed now to her mother's anxious eyes to press the simile still further and literally wilt with disappointment.

CHAPTER XVI

THAT night Olive told her husband of Philippa Blount's invitation. Of the girl's avowed motive or her own she said nothing.

"Of course Fern must go," she ended.

"Go!" he ejaculated. "I'd like to see her turn such a chance down. You clinched the matter on the spot, I hope?"

"No," she said, evasively. "I didn't jump at it."

Braisted was silent a moment.

"On second thought I believe you were right, Olive. I hear it's just as well not to appear too eager with Marshall Blount. Are you sure she said the invitation was his idea?"

"Oh yes. She told me that he took a fancy to Fern."

"Good!" he chuckled, beginning to walk about the room. "It may spread to her relations."

She watched him with a fresh doubt uppermost.

"Steve," she demanded, abruptly, "what do you want of Marshall Blount?"

He gave her a quick side glance.

"Who says I want anything of him?"

"I judge by your actions."

He resumed his pacing.

"Well?" he said, over his shoulder.

"When you found out that it was his home where Fern was asked for Christmas you gave me no peace till I made her accept."

"Anybody would catch at such a bid. Blount is a big man. Then, you'll remember, there was that nonsense about young Halsey."

"That needn't trouble you now, Steve."

"It doesn't. Fern never goes out of her way to speak to him that I can see. Have you noticed her with him at all?"

"I gave them a chance to talk the night Fern came," she admitted, coloring a little, "but that's practically all she has seen of him. Her mind is full of other things, I guess. She passed him in the hall to-night, as if she didn't know he was there."

The man gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"We handled her case just the right way," he said. "By the time she comes back she'll have forgotten she ever had a love affair. Probably it looks silly to her already. How long will the Blounts be gone, by the way?"

"For several weeks, I gathered."

Her reply cast him into a brown-study.

"How would you like to take a flying trip West?" he asked, suddenly. "Say in July?"

She looked up blankly.

"Have you gone crazy, Steve?"

"What makes you think it?"

"Because you act so. You're like a child with too many toys. You drop your new turnout for an automobile; you build a house out home and run away from it; you buy a bigger one here, and then, before you even move in, go planning to run away from that, too."

"Oh, I reckon we'll use the whole outfit," he laughed. "As for houses, I think we can stand two. Marshall Blount must own at least six. But to come back to that trip, don't you want to see Fern? It's going to be lonesome without her in the new place."

"You don't need to tell me that. Even if we could all be together, it would still be lonesome in that great house."

"You'll sing another tune when you've lived in it a week. But you don't have to stick there all summer. Why not run out West and see Fern?"

She gave a gesture of impatience.

"Oh, don't treat me as if I were half-witted," she retorted. "If that was your only reason for going you would tell Fern to stay home. What you really want is to know Marshall Blount."

"Well, then, I do," he admitted. "As for meeting him, I could probably fix that up here in Washington through Ben; but I'd rather have it come about in another way. It ought

to be a social meeting if I'm to make a friend of him."

"A friend!"

"Yes, a friend. After that—but I can't go into it just yet. Our plans aren't ripe?"

"Our plans! Do you mean yours and Proctor Hoyt's?"

Braisted drew back into his accustomed shell.

"Now you are getting curious."

"Haven't I some reason to be curious, I'd like to ask? I don't like mysteries between you and me, Steve. It wasn't our old way. I used to tell you everything, and you were as open and above board with me."

"You'll know what's what in good time, Olive," he put her off with a laugh. "But if it's any satisfaction to you to hear that this is part of the business with Hoyt, why, there you are."

"And you want to interest Marshall Blount, get him to put money into it?"

Vexed by her insistence, he wheeled on her with a sharp change of manner.

"Now look here," he said, "I've passed my word that I would keep this thing quiet, and I intend to do it. No amount of pumping will get it out of me, and you might as well save your strength. I'm not playing marbles! As I told you before, it's a whopping big deal with a prospect of big returns."

Tears welled to her eyes at his roughness.

"Steve, Steve!" she pleaded. "Aren't we rich enough now?"

"Not by modern standards."

"Then let us go back to old-fashioned standards."

"I wouldn't change back under any consideration. If I am smart enough to do it, why should not I make my pile as well as Marshall Blount?"

"Oh, don't—*don't* envy that miserable man!"

"Why do you call him that?"

"Because life is just ashes and wormwood to him. His own daughter told me so. 'He has sucked his orange dry'—those were her very words."

"The Blount girl told you that?"

"Only this afternoon."

He was struck by this new light on his hero; but it failed to swerve him from his own purpose.

"Then the more fool Marshall Blount!" he ejaculated. "I thought he had more sense."

She realized that the matter had passed beyond argument, and wearied herself against his stubborn will no more. What must be, must be. In the morning she gave Philippa's message to Fern, and was prepared to hear Steve announce his own intention to go West later in the summer; but, whether his plans were more fluid than they seemed, or because he deemed it prudent to hold this project in reserve, he dropped no hint of last night's discussion.

What most concerned him for the moment was Fern's lukewarm reception of the great news.

"Why, I expected to see you do a double shuffle at the mention of such a thing," he complained. "I guess you don't appreciate what a chance you've got. Do you suppose Marshall Blount asks any Tom, Dick, or Harry to travel with him? Lord love you, that car of his is fine enough for royalty."

Fern threw more animation into her manner.

"Of course I appreciate the invitation," she said; "but I expected to spend some of the summer in our new house. It will seem almost like being abroad."

"Yes; there is something in that," agreed her father, complacently. "You ought to hear Hoyt go on about the stuff up there. But, all the same, you can't afford to turn down a trip with Marshall Blount."

The girl appealed to her mother.

"Do you, too, want to get rid of me?"

"I want you to do what will be for the best," answered Olive.

Braisted had reached the end of his patience.

"We've had enough shilly-shallying," he declared. "Fern, you see Miss Blount right away and tell her she can count on you. And tell her with a cheerful face. What's got into the the girl?" he demanded, as she left the room with an air of martyrdom. "You'd think we were begging her to go back to Tuscarora County.

You don't suppose she still has Ben Halsey on the brain?"

"I told you last night that *that* needn't worry you."

The turn she gave to her reply drew his notice.

"You speak as if something else might worry me. Maybe you can see more point to Fern's mulishness than I can?"

His wife was seized with a great longing to avow her fear; but she feared derision. To Steve's mind, instinct and intuition carried no conviction. Her indecision whipped up his interest.

"You evidently know something," he pressed.

"It probably wouldn't seem anything to you."

"I'll be the judge of that. Out with it! What's up with Fern now? Not another love affair?"

"Yes; and it's worrying me sick. She's just crazy over that man Hoyt."

"You think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

Braisted stared at her a moment with the fixed, unseeing gaze that of late had become a habit with him.

"She hasn't seen much of him," he said.

"She has seen more of him than you think. That Estabrook woman has thrown them together. I could almost wish her dead for it."

"Oh, keep cool, keep cool," he charged. "It wasn't a crime. Tell me how it happened."

Olive repeated Fern's version of the meetings.

"There's nothing strange about that," he commented.

"Nothing strange in that woman's traipsing out-of-the-way streets with Hoyt! I wonder if her husband would say the same?"

"I don't think it would worry him. They were acquainted before I met any of them. I dare say they merely ran across each other out Beauchamp Manor way. He walks for the sake of his liver, and she to keep down her weight. This isn't a village scandal, Olive. Don't let your dislike of Mrs. Estabrook make you do her an injustice. And don't misjudge Hoyt, either. He's as straight as a die."

"Was it straight of him not to mention that he'd met Fern?"

"There was nothing underhand about it—nor surprising, for that matter. He has too big a proposition on his mind to give such trifles a second thought."

"He hasn't too much on his mind to flirt with Fern. Your own eyes ought to have told you that."

"I saw only his usual way with women. Don't take him so seriously."

"Fern took him seriously. You'd have thought so if you had seen her face last night when she heard he wouldn't stay to dinner." She added convincing details.

"That won't do," he said, gravely. "I don't

mind his making up to her; but she mustn't follow his lead at this stage of the game. I can't have Hoyt think she is throwing herself at his head. She must play her cards another way if she wants to marry him."

"Marry him!"

"That's what I said."

She could not believe him in earnest.

"Steve!" she cried. "What are you saying? You don't mean you'd as lief see your daughter marry that—that—"

"Well?" he prompted. "What is he?"

For a long moment she stared at him excitedly.

"I don't know," she challenged. "Do you?"

He caught up the gauge without an instant's hesitation.

"I know that he's a thoroughbred to begin with—anybody can see that. He's got a way with him that's only born in a man and comes from a line of ancestors who've been used to march at the head of the procession. And he has brains. I wish I had his brains. But you know all this. You've had time to size him up. You've watched him mix with other people, heard him talk—"

"Yes, I've heard him talk. But who will vouch for the truth of it?"

"He doesn't need anybody to vouch for him. He speaks for himself."

"I should say he did! I don't believe half

he says any more. No one human being could have done all he brags about."

Hoyt's advocate gave a grunt of disgust.

"Tuscarora again!" he exclaimed. "You never met a man of the world back home; so, of course, Hoyt is a liar! I'm glad I've more confidence in mankind. I admire Proctor Hoyt. I think—"

"Oh, think what you please about him, Steve," she interrupted, desperately. "It is Fern that matters. I don't want to pry into your new business. You've snubbed me so often that I'm done with it. But when you can calmly discuss Fern's marrying this man, you should realize that, as her mother, there are some things I ought to know."

Braisted hesitated for a moment, and then slowly crossed the room to her.

"In six months' time Proctor Hoyt will be considered the catch of the town," he said, impressively. "I can't tell you exactly what I mean, but you may take Steve Braisted's word for it that it's worth while. Just credit me with a little common sense, Olive. Do you suppose I'd hand my girl over to a good-for-nothing or a blackleg?"

"Of course not, Steve."

"Another thing. I'd never try to force a husband on her she didn't care about. But I judge from what you say that she and Hoyt do take to each other, and, if the wind continues to set that way, I sha'n't have a word to say

against it. What I don't want, however, is for him to think he's struck a cinch, and the sooner Fern gets away the better. I prefer to keep business and sentiment apart for a little while longer. By fall they'll both know whether they're in earnest. Fern has been a kind of human kaleidoscope this year, and there's no telling what colors she'll show after a whirl across the continent."

With this Olive had to be content. She could not bring herself to speak of the affectionate manicurist. She would have had to abase her pride and explain Madam Sheba, too. Moreover, she could not believe that the Providence of her simple faith would let Fern wreck her happiness. Separation would do its work. By autumn another fancy would have eclipsed Hoyt even as Hoyt had eclipsed poor Ben.

So ended the Easter outing. Instead of a return to simplicity, it had heralded a wider plunge into uncertainty, and when the family scattered —S. J. to the seat of wisdom of his choice, Fern to the refining influence of Miss Abercrombie, Steve to his cafés and committee-rooms—Olive sat herself down in her familiar rocker in the favorite corner of the room she called her own, and asked herself if it were not all a bad dream. Whereupon, from the adjoining chamber strolled a tangible proof of the reality of things, embodied in the uncouth shape of Eli Yale, whose master, swayed by dietary considerations, had at the

eleventh hour decided to leave him in her unwilling custody. And, as she shrank now from the ugly mask, the creature seemed to symbolize the brute force of circumstance which was hurrying her she knew not where.

CHAPTER XVII

AS the time for leaving the Walden drew near —and it came swiftly—Olive realized that the hotel had indeed become a second home to her, and that her fellow-guests had taken a place in her regard which stood for more than friendship and perhaps had its nearest analogy in the tie binding crusading comrades-in-arms. The giant Red Tape had at one time or another threatened to worst them all; the same pitfalls had beset their way; similar triumphs had crowned their strife. Together they had become socially expert and unafraid, veterans with a store of common memories.

And that she, as an individual, had come to mean something to her fellows was made plain on the eve of her departure. Just before dinner on the last Sunday she spent in the hotel, Mrs. Tully, with elaborate precautions for secrecy, drew her aside and bade her prepare to be surprised.

"Surprised!" she said. "What has happened?"

"Nothing yet. It's to come off to-night in the back parlor after the singing. I feel like a Benedict Arnold to tell you; but I hate being

taken unawares myself, and I'm sure you don't relish it either. The fact is, we have clubbed together to buy you a farewell present."

Olive felt suddenly weak-kneed and sat down.

"My stars!" she cried. "You mean the—the Congressmen's wives?"

"I mean all the women in the hotel. The idea started with the official ladies, but first one and then another of the department girls, to whom you've given carriage rides and been lovely in other ways, got wind of it and insisted on contributing, so we made it general. It turned out that you had made friends of everybody from Harriet Pratt to Milly, the maid. Don't look so woebegone over it."

The victim of popularity made a heroic attempt to smile.

"But I didn't do anything much," she protested. "I don't want presents or thanks. Can't—oh, can't you head them off?"

"I should say I couldn't! The present is not only bought and marked, but hidden under a table-spread behind the organ this very minute. And while I'm in the traitor business I may as well tell you what it is. I was for giving you something personal, say a watch or a piece of silver, but after you took Mrs. Pratt all through your new house last week—you don't know how it tickled her—she came back with an idea which no amount of talk could change. She said she saw so many things she'd never seen

before, that she was in downright despair of our hitting on anything you hadn't already; but just before she left, as she was taking a last look around the hall, she noticed that you had no umbrella-stand. Well, an umbrella-stand we had to get, and, since it was her idea, Harriet simply elected herself a committee of one to pick it out. I can't say I fancy her choice myself, though I've kept my opinion quiet. Mrs. Estabrook made no bones of telling what she thought, however, and right to Mrs. Pratt's face; but I won't repeat her remarks. I won't tell you, either, what the thing is like. You might as well have that much of a surprise when the speech-making is over."

"The speech-making! Is there—will she—"

Mrs. Tully nodded.

"She *will*, of course. A team of wild elephants couldn't drag her away from such a chance. To my mind Harriet Pratt is the strongest kind of argument against woman suffrage. We women talk a lot now—it's our safety-valve; but if, along with the ballot and the right to run for office, we should get the speech habit ingrained, there wouldn't be any living in the land. If a person like Harriet were elected Speaker, she would take the title literally and turn the *Congressional Record* into an autobiography. And just imagine—but you don't want to hear any more of my ramblings. You need the time to think up your impromptu reply."

Olive moaned feebly.

"Must I speak, too?" she asked. "Can't I just say 'Thank you'?"

The old lady grinned sympathetically.

"Oh, of course, you could get out of it by being too moved to respond, but it would disappoint the meeting. We dote on the felicitous impromptu here in Washington. It is a sign that we're learning to play the game."

"But what *can* I say?"

"You have me there. I don't see myself what could be said on getting that umbrella-stand. What there is in favor of it, Mrs. Pratt will say. What there is against it—which is a lot—*you* can't say, and that seems to exhaust the field. I think you'll have to confine yourself to what the politicians call glittering generalities. Don't worry about it, my dear. Something will probably come to you. If there doesn't, why, just be touched and stammer."

Her departure left Olive panic-stricken, and it took all her fund of self-control to resist a craven impulse to run away. Why would they give her a present? And why, if they must be foolish, did they go about it in such a public way? Couldn't she feign illness for the evening? It would not be so black a deception; she felt positively sick already, and, perhaps, when the gathering heard, they would send Mrs. Pratt alone with the offering. But reflection told her that they would never do this. If she eluded

them now, they would plan another conspicuous martyrdom, when not even the hymn-singing would help soften the ordeal. Then, with a return to characteristic unselfishness, she put herself in their place. They meant only kindness, and deserved, not this cowardice, but her fullest gratitude. She must not rob them of their pleasure in giving. She must go among them as always, listen to the hymns with her usual calm, ignore the shrouded gift in the shadow of the organ, show surprise at the climax—oh, if Mrs. Tully had not warned her at all!—and, if possible, requite Mrs. Pratt's rounded periods with a little speech of thanks.

A little speech of thanks! There loomed the fearful stumbling-block. The thought of facing a large drawing-roomful of people, specially assembled to do her kindness, petrified her with fright. She strove, during the dinner she could not eat, to recall how Mrs. Pratt had worded her facile effusions at the hundred and one meetings of the official ladies; but the substance of the social arbiter's eloquence had evaporated, leaving only a memory of prolixity which Olive had no ambition to copy. Brevity rather was her aim, and, as the time for preparation lapsed and inspiration still hung fire, she feared she should employ it to the verge of parsimony.

Her abstraction drew Steve's notice.

"Aren't you feeling quite up to par?" he asked. "These new green peas are worth your

while. They put me in mind of our truck-farm days."

They seemed in some recondite way to put his wife in mind of something else.

"How do you start in to compose a speech?" she queried, abruptly.

"I call Ben Halsey."

"Yes. And what next?"

"That's all," he grinned.

"Do you mean that you don't—that Ben—"

"Of course he writes them. What's a secretary for? I've no time to fool away in that fashion. He did my campaign speeches, and he wrote that one on conservation I got off in the House a while ago. I've had a lot of complimentary letters from out home about that. I had leave to print and franked copies all over the district."

Her doubt as to the ethics of this state of affairs lost itself in the dazzling thought that Ben was the very instrument to work her salvation. Making an excuse for leaving the table, she hurried around the corner to the secretary's boarding-place only to be told that he had not yet come home.

"But you expect him?" she asked, anxiously. "I must see him."

The slatternly mulatto who answered her ring gave the matter her sympathetic attention.

"Wall," she stated, "he sayd he'd shorely be home to dinnah; but he's 'peared not to hone

much fer what he eats lately, an' he mought fergit to come at all."

"You don't think he's sick?"

"No'm." She smiled wisely. "Hit look mo' like love to me. But 'scuse me; will you come in an' set down? I'm helpin' serve."

Olive traversed a dingy hall to a dingier drawing-room crowded with frowsy plush furniture and malodorous from the meal going noisily forward somewhere below stairs. The whole aspect of the place was mean and cheerless, and filled her motherly heart with self-reproach that she should never before have investigated the secretary's manner of life. She had, it was true, asked him whether his boarding-place was satisfactory, but she felt now that she should have taken an active interest in his welfare. Certainly she would look into the detail of his salary at once. The author of Steve's speeches deserved far better housing than this. She was preoccupied with this thought when Halsey presently came upon her with an ejaculation of surprise.

"Is anything wrong?" he demanded.

"Yes." She swept the whole squalid setting with a gesture. "All this is wrong. Doesn't my husband pay you a large enough salary to let you live in a different sort of home?"

Ben colored violently.

"Of course," he stammered. "I—I am well paid. Mr. Braisted has always given me more than his government allowance for clerk hire."

"Then why don't you find a better boarding-place?"

"I was in another house at first," he explained, hurriedly, "but I thought it best to make a change. This is very convenient to the Walden, you see, and—and it's really not so seedy as it looks. The table is plentiful, and my window—"

She laid a hand on his arm, and he forsook his excuses abruptly.

"That is not your real reason."

"No," he admitted.

"You came here to save money—to save money for Fern?"

He met her accusation frankly.

"Yes," he owned. "I did have something of the kind in mind."

She turned aside with a lump in her throat.

"If I were you, Ben," she said, slowly, avoiding his look, "I wouldn't scrimp any more."

He was silent for a tense moment.

"You tell me that because you think I've no longer a chance," he declared, finally.

"I spoke for your good."

"I realize it. And it's the same thing my common sense has been telling me. For a little while—that first night of Fern's vacation—I imagined she felt toward me as she did in the beginning; but I soon saw that it was the new house, not being with me, that brought the sparkle to her eyes. And common sense tells me that she sees I am not the match she may expect;

that I am drifting out of her life; that other things, perhaps another man, will take my place; but—" his voice rang out defiantly—"I refuse to listen to common sense. I mean to go on hoping still."

Olive threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"And I'll go on hoping, too," she cried.

They talked earnestly together for a time, till with a start she recalled her real errand and the too-generous company which must already be gathering in the back parlor of the Walden. She feared it was too late; but she had no sooner voiced her difficulty than Ben began jotting notes on the back of an envelope, which, with a word added here or stricken out there, became in a trice a graceful little response.

"There," he said, after reading it over to her; "that ought to answer whatever they give or say. It's neither too long nor too short, and you'll easily have it memorized by the time you get back."

Olive sallied forth in the twilight, and, taking a roundabout course, entered one of the parks and conned her task. After some half-dozen circlings of the militant bronze, her sole spectator, she felt herself letter-perfect and set her face toward home, devoting the last of her leisure to an attempt to throw expression into her recital. So absorbed was she that she did not recognize Steve till he detached himself from the

summer-evening group about the door and told her that she was in great demand.

"At least half a dozen women have asked me where you were. Mrs. Pratt especially is in a stew. Here she is again."

Olive thrust her notes into the bosom of her dress as the social arbiter bore down on her, and with their disappearance vanished every recollection of their contents. Stage-fright gripped her like a vampire, sucking out her courage and benumbing her brain. She had not the faintest notion what Mrs. Pratt said to her on the way to the back parlor, or how she got to a conspicuous seat in the front row of rocking-chairs which converged on the organ and the cloaked mystery in its shadow. She was even unaware who were her nearest neighbors till Mrs. Tully, on her left, bent to her with a word of cheer.

"How you took me in!" she whispered. "After your joke about being nervous I expected you would run away; but here you come marching in as cool as a Maine nor'easter! Poor Mrs. Pratt is the one who looks flustered."

The victim wet her lips and battled to feel as calm as she was said to look. Then some one on her right, who turned out to be Mrs. Estabrook, handed her a hymn-book.

"They're chiefly modern dissenting jingles, aren't they?" she said, fluttering the leaves of her own thin volume as if it were something

curious, yet scarcely polite. "I see hardly any hymns with which, as a churchwoman, I am familiar."

Mrs. Tully leaned forward for caustic retort; but just then the organist began the first bar of a hymn so ancient that even Mrs. Estabrook approved, and she let its solemn music answer for her. After they had sung this, some one called for another quite as old; then still others, as stanchly orthodox, followed, to confound the critic and to soothe Olive with their accustomed anodyne. As she had never in her life had a religious doubt which the familiar hymns could not dispel, so had they often charmed away her secular worries of the week and fortified her against what might lie in store.

And this was what happened now. She ceased to feel that she faced an ordeal. Was not the room the same where she had often found rest? Were not these the same friendly folk who had shared other vesper meditations? How foolish she had been to shrink from meeting them to-night. Homespun in most part, like herself, they meant her only kindness. Her heart warmed toward them all, and, by virtue of her transient association with this place of quiet hours, even Mrs. Estabrook shone in a more gracious light.

And even Mrs. Estabrook admitted that Mrs. Pratt handled the presentation with dignity. Despite the prophecies of the envious, she was not oratorical, she was not prolix.

"In these short lives of ours," she said, simply, "we at times meet a fellow-being who radiates kindness as the sun does warmth. We have had such a benefactor under this roof, and, now that she is to leave us, we ask her to let us testify our gratitude by a little gift. Like yourself, Mrs. Braisted, it performs humble service in a beautiful way. Accept it with our love."

Through a mist Olive dimly beheld an oriental figure of many warring colors. If it was not beautiful, she did not perceive it. The spirit in which it was proffered was what counted; and to that spirit, forgetting her timidity with her prepared response, she made reply.

"But it's you who have been kind to me," she cried, stretching out her hands to them. "I was lonely, and you made this place a home. And, oh, do help me make the new place seem a home!" she entreated. "You will always see this present of yours as you enter the door, and I hope you will enter often. Begin Thursday," she added, with sudden inspiration, "my first Thursday—and *all* come."

CHAPTER XVIII

FERN read an account of the affair in a morning paper, and, dropping in Monday afternoon, viewed the gift for herself. Olive led her to the bow-window of her sitting-room, where she had had the umbrella-stand placed temporarily, and raised the shades.

"He is a Moor," she explained.

"So I see."

"That jar behind him is for the umbrellas, of course. The sword in his sash comes out, and Mrs. Pratt said it could be used for a paper-cutter, which seemed to me a good idea. I've often wished I had a paper-cutter in the front hall when I've taken letters from the postman."

Fern left off her appraisal for a moment.

"It won't ever be necessary in the new house for you to take letters from the postman," she pointed out. "Creevey, or some other servant, will attend to it."

"That will spoil half the fun of getting letters," said Olive. "Hasn't he a first name?"

"Who?"

"The butler—Creevey."

"Of course. But you must not call him by

it. He wouldn't know what to think of it. He's English."

Olive thought this no compliment to the intelligence of a great nation; but Fern deemed it an unanswerable argument, and reverted to the Moor.

"Of course," she said, "you are not thinking seriously of putting this thing in the hall?"

"I am."

"Among the marbles?"

"Right among the marbles," assured her mother, firmly.

"A trumpery, cast-iron, red, green, and yellow Moor alongside the Greeks!"

"Yes. I can't see that he'd look a bit more out of place than an English butler."

"But, mother—"

"Now don't think, Fern, you can talk me into poking this umbrella-rack off in a corner. I promised a roomful of people that they should find it in my front hall, and so they shall, as sure as the sun rises Thursday."

The girl gave an exclamation of annoyance.

"Did you ask them for Thursday?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Because it's not only closing day at Beauchamp Manor, but my last day in Washington as well. I came in purposely to tell you. Philippa's father has wired her that we're leaving early Saturday, and she thinks it best for

us to take the midnight train Thursday, as she has several errands in New York."

Her mother was taken aback by the news.

"To think that your very first day at home should be your last! Why, I counted on you for a week, at least, to help start the place going."

"It will run itself if you let Creevey have a free rein," asserted Fern, confidently. "He has worked in some of the finest houses, both at home and over here. I'm so glad Mr. Hoyt knew that he was out of employment. Just send him into the place a few hours ahead of you, and everything will be in order. And put the responsibility of Thursday on his shoulders, too. Tell him how many people you expect, and what you want served. As it's a kind of housewarming, I presume you will have something fairly elaborate in the way of refreshments. Creevey will know what is most appropriate. I'll leave my new blue chiffon unpacked and help you receive, though I don't want it considered in any way a début. I shall come out formally in the fall or early winter."

Olive had not foreseen a function of such magnitude when she pressed her impulsive invitation on the donors of the Moor, nor did she dream that Steve, on his part, had hospitable plans for the same date till he presently brought her a list of people he wished asked to dine with them Thursday night.

"But that is Fern's last evening," she objected.

"I know it, and I want the dinner to be a kind of send-off for her. At the same time," he went on, "I want to show the Blount girl that we're not such hayseeds ourselves. She may meet a sweller tableful in her father's dining-room, but when it comes to gray matter I guess my list will pan out favorably alongside. I don't want a crowd, you see. The Estabrooks and Tullys make four, Hoyt and the girls seven, and you and I bring the total up to nine."

"Oughtn't we to ask the Pratts? I'm afraid she'll be offended if we don't, particularly after last night."

Braisted vetoed the suggestion at once.

"This is my dinner," he declared, "and if you're worried about what anybody thinks, just tell them so and shove the blame on me. Nine people are as many as I want. I'm not planning a banquet."

"You could leave out the Estabrooks or Hoyt."

"For the sake of that sour-faced woman! Not much. Hoyt and Mrs. Estabrook will be the life of the party. You'll have to ask Mrs. Pratt some other time when Miss Blount is with us. Now get the notes off right away."

She sat down to her desk and dipped a pen.

"Perhaps Philippa can't come," she said.

"And perhaps she can. I asked her in Lafayette Square this afternoon. Your note is just a matter of form."

Her entire connection with the affair was apparently perfunctory, for it transpired that Steve, not content with choosing the guests, had also found leisure to confer with the omniscient Creevey as to the menu. Creevey began to loom an important figure in her future. He was seemingly as infallible in his peculiar field as was Harriet Pratt in hers, and Olive had misgivings as to the wisdom of domesticating such a paragon. What would Creevey, accustomed to the nobility of Europe and the plutocracy of America, think of her plain ways and simple tastes? She had not even seen him as yet. Fern and Steve between them had effected his capture in the teeth of a tempting offer—so Proctor Hoyt said—from the British embassy itself. Surely a speaking testimonial!

Nothing, however, could have been more respectful or respectable than Creevey's bearing, when he met her on the threshold of her new home, the next day but one. He was astonishingly good-looking, with a crown of gray hair and a regularity of features which, had he sat in the United States Senate, where Olive felt that he properly belonged, would have won him the steadfast favor of the ladies' galleries. Nor was his speech less distinguished. He asked her wishes for the day with a voice and purity of accent which few of the statesmen he outshone could boast, and, at her bidding, with quiet efficiency made his suggestions for Thursday's

reception, which, as advised by Fern, she intrusted solely to his hands.

As she was about to end this stately conference she bethought herself of the Walden testimonial, which she did not see.

"An umbrella-rack was sent over with the trunks this morning," she said. "What was done with it?"

Creevey gravely ushered her back to the vestibule and showed her the Moor hiding his chromatic brilliance in a nook between a fluted column and a palm.

"I inferred that you would wish it placed where the givers could see it, madam," he explained. "In fact, the newspaper account which met my eye quoted you as saying that it should be visible from the door. If you will kindly take your station *at* the door—"

"Yes," she said, complying, "I can make him out now."

Creevey permitted himself a decorous smile.

"The palm reconciles the discordant colors," he pointed out. "I could do nothing until I thought of it."

She could not take offense at his manner—it was too deferential; nor at his reasoning, for the oriental intruder, as she could now see for herself, quarreled outrageously with his surroundings; but she placed friendship before art or even the sensibilities of an esthetic butler, and resolved that no Walden critic should accuse her of snobbery.

"That was very thoughtful of you—Creevey," she said, getting out the menial form of address with difficulty.

"Thank you, madam."

"But we won't have the palm here Thursday."

He thanked her again with his strange rising inflection, though for what he was thankful she could not conceive, and, as she moved toward the stairway, he tentatively opened a gilded grating in the marble paneling, which she had imagined bore some relation to the heating apparatus.

"The lift is now in order, madam," he suggested.

"I didn't know there was an elevator. Who runs it?"

"It is automatic."

He explained the mechanism and stood aside for her to enter, which she did with hesitation. It was an odd sensation to float aloft as sole occupant of the car; but the toy came to a precise stop at the right place, and she issued near her own rooms with the elation of a new and not unpleasant experience.

Whether Creevey also ranked as a not unpleasant experience she could as yet scarcely determine. It was confusing to find him so handsome, while his familiarity with the house gave her the feeling that he, not herself, was the one in authority. His attempt to fulfill her promise to the Walden and yet key the Moorish

offender with his background was also a cause for wonder. Were all English butlers such prodigies of tact? She could not put him out of her thoughts; and when Steve came presently, eager to talk of the house, she deluged him with Creevey.

Braisted threw light on the enigma.

"It was certainly foxy of him to try to show and hide the Moor at the same time," he laughed; "but it's not so surprising. Knowing the house like a book, he naturally can tell what looks best everywhere. Didn't I mention that he worked for the Colburns?"

"For the Colburns! Here?"

"Sure. That was the main reason why I hired him."

"If that wasn't like a man! It ought to have been your main reason for steering clear of him."

"How so?"

"Because he'll always be comparing us with the Colburns—that's why."

"Well, let him! I don't mind. The Braisted family may not be long on culture, but he'll get his wages on pay-day, which was more than Larry Colburn could always manage, I'm told. Don't you worry about comparisons. They're all in our favor. Let's stroll through the plant and try to realize it's ours."

It required more than the walk with Steve to convince her that this great edifice was home. The humble trifles which signified domestic

comfort to her were everywhere lacking. Not a corner in the whole echoing place deserved the adjective cozy, not a room contained a rocking-chair. The troop of unfamiliar faces—ten servants altogether had been enrolled for house and stable—made her feel an interloper, and wherever she stepped, whether in the ceremonial apartments of queer furnishings or in her marvelous suite of the sunken bath, which she contrasted sadly with her tub in Tuscarora Falls, she half expected the widow of Lawrence Colburn to appear and resent her intrusion. This same impression haunted their first dinner under the gilded squares and rosettes of the carved ceiling, which Creevey, answering a query of Steve's, told them had been copied from a palace in Verona.

"But the mantelpiece is genuine Italian Renaissance work," he added. "It came from a villa near Fiesole."

"How about the sideboard and the hangings," asked Braisted, pursuing his quest of curious knowledge. "They look like old-timers."

"The François Premier buffet is a reproduction," instructed the butler. "The original is in the Cluny Museum at Paris. The Dutch cupboard is old and a fine example. The tapestries are seventeenth-century Flemish, and represent scenes from the life of Ulysses. The marriage-coffer between the end windows is, if I may say so, spurious."

"So!" Braisted left his seat and examined the massive piece closely. Worm-holes riddled the blackened oak, and several of the carved figures tripped their bacchic dance devoid of nose or hands; but these ancient scars enhanced rather than lessened its interest, and seemed to convict the butler of crass ignorance, till he sounded a worm-hole and exhibited a tiny leaden shot.

"Acids did the rest," he explained. "You can hardly conceive, sir, what wonders can be worked with permanganate of potash."

Steve whistled his amazement.

"Have we any more fakes?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, several. There are false tear-bottles and scarabs in the drawing-room cabinet, a bogus cinque-cento triptych in the library, and various canvasses and terra-cottas of which I have doubts. But don't understand me as saying that they're of no value. A good imitation may be worth a great deal."

"As a gold brick?" hazarded his employer, shrewdly.

Creevey smiled and then resumed the air of a servitor, which for the instant he had discarded.

"I meant that they are beautiful in themselves," he said.

The master of the house eyed his servant with profound respect.

"You seem mighty well posted on antiques," he commented.

"Thank you, sir. I have a taste for such things."

"Did you pick up your information with the Colburns?"

"Not altogether, sir. I was employed three years in the town-house of an English family, which was considered a show-place. The public was allowed to view the collections on Fridays, and it was one of my duties to explain the objects of art."

Steve threw his wife a look of comical dismay as the man effaced himself.

"Perhaps it would have been better to let the British embassy outbid me," he laughed. "I'm not sure I can live up to Creevey. He makes me feel as if *I* ought to get up and wait on *him*."

"But how can he go on being a butler?"

"Because it pays. He draws more money from me than Uncle Sam gives many a department clerk."

Proctor Hoyt's card coming in at this pass, Braisted bade the servant ask him into the dining-room, and he presently hailed them from the doorway.

"At last I see you suitably environed," he said, halting with his head tilted on one side to admire them. "I have often wondered what you reminded me of, Steve, and now it has come to me. You are one of the great merchant princes reincarnate. This noble fabric is not in

modern Washington. It stands in the Via Balbi, of Genoa, or perhaps in the Florentine Via Tornabuoni, or, better still, at some glorious turn of the Grand Canal. Yes, it is Venice. I came by gondola."

Braisted gave a loud, pleased laugh.

"You're certainly a past-master at jollying, Hoyt," he said; "but I do like to hear you reel it off. Have a glass of wine or a Benedictine?"

"Merely coffee—black, with cognac, Creevey, and one of your excellent cigars, Steve."

When Creevey had again withdrawn, Hoyt turned a look of inquiry on his host.

"Will he do?" he asked.

"Do!" exclaimed Braisted. "Why, man alive, he's too good to be true. I half believe you've palmed off a disguised college professor on us." He rehearsed the butler's astonishing opinions of the household treasures.

Hoyt nodded smilingly.

"Yes," he said, "he is great—Creevey the Great! I am a democrat, but I must admit that monarchy breeds the ideal servant. America could never have produced a Creevey. But don't spoil him. Let the poor fellow air his hobby sometimes—it's his life; but keep him in his place, keep him strictly in his place."

In view of this injunction, Olive was edified when, late in the evening, the rigid advocate of discipline, supposing himself for the moment

alone with Creevey, laid his arm familiarly across the butler's shoulders; but, inasmuch as sundry drafts of whisky and soda had followed the coffee and cognac, she gave his lapse no serious thought.

CHAPTER XIX

THE morrow witnessed Fern's farewell to her school-days. This implied no ordinary commencement exercises. Things were ordered otherwise at Beauchamp Manor. Miss Abercrombie did not formally graduate any one. Results, not parchments—as the catalogue put it—being her aim, Beauchamp Manor cultivation was allowed to speak for itself without the aid of sheepskin. No bored assemblage writhed on flesh-mortifying seats while chits just out of braids held forth upon the true conduct of life. Instead, Miss Abercrombie merely announced that she would be at home, and, gathering her finished product about her, let her bevy of "unbonneted" justify itself by its works.

On the surface of things, Olive had to admit, Miss Abercrombie triumphed. If the prime object of feminine education was to evolve a composed hostess, then no girl of the graceful group which helped to do the honors of Beauchamp Manor's pseudo-baronial hall need fear to face life. They bore themselves proudly, their greetings were ready, their smiles knew no rest. And among them, her delicate color

heightened winsomely, her gray eyes full of animation, Fern played her part with such ease that Steve, who had crowded himself into a hot frock-coat for the occasion, was puffed with boastful pride.

"What's the matter with Tuscarora?" he asked his wife, in a hoarse whisper. "Why, Fern can give Marshall Blount's daughter, or any of them, cards and spades! She'll hold her own wherever you put her."

"What if you put her back in Tuscarora?" asked Olive, soberly. "What if she had to go back to plain living, maybe poverty?"

"Huh!" he grunted. "You croak as if we were next door to the poor-house. Fern will step into one of the crack places of the city, and she won't feel a mite strange in it. After this training she'll take to it like a cat to goldfish! Not that this outfit looks so grand to me as it did," he qualified, after a moment of searching self-analysis. "Owning an establishment like ours is a sure-enough eye-opener. First time I came here I walked round with my jaw sagging. Now I can discriminate a little and size things up at pretty near their real value. For instance, I notice that a lot of these statues are just casts, not the best marble like ours; and I'd like to hear Creevey's opinion of that consignment of armor in the vestibule. I'd bet dollars to doughnuts he'd say it was faked."

These esthetic musings were cut short by a

general exodus toward the lawn, where, perhaps because of the relaxing influence of ices, music, and countless roses in full bloom, and possibly because Miss Abercrombie's vision had its human limitations, the pupils of Beauchamp Manor doffed their stateliness and reverted to a hungry, slangy state of nature.

"Oh, we call that drawing-room business Aunt Abby's Peerless Starch," Fern laughed when her father remarked the transformation. "It's all right for dress-parade, but who wants to look like Queen Elizabeth all the time? It's rot, you know; simply rot."

"Oh, don't use that word," begged her mother. "It's horrid."

"I don't take to it either, coming from you, Fern," added Steve.

Fern shrugged her amusement at their sudden nicety.

"Why is it worse than tommy-rot, which you both use?" she asked, flippantly. "My slang can't touch S. J.'s when he puts his mind on it. Why don't you lecture him? That reminds me," she went on. "I had a note from him this morning. He is coming down from New Haven to see me off. It will be nice to have at least one of the family."

"I may be on hand myself," announced her father. "I must go to New York on business some day this week, and I thought I might as well leave to-night with you and Miss Blount."

"To-night!" said Olive.

"Why, yes. You don't mind, do you? If you do, better come along and make it a family group."

She shook her head.

"It will be hard enough to say good-by at home. When will you be back, Steve?"

"Saturday evening, probably. With ten servants on the premises, I dare say you won't feel timid?"

"No," she returned, absently. She had noticed with a pang that Steve's offhand suggestion received no second from Fern. Then, while her eyes dwelt on the girl as she restlessly scanned the crowd, she perceived her glance fix itself with animation on a figure crossing the greensward from the gate. "Here is Mr. Hoyt," she added, in a voice which she tried to make colorless. "Did you ask him, Steve?"

Braisted's surprise acquitted him.

"No," he said. "It didn't occur to me."

"I asked Miss Abercrombie to send him a card," Fern explained, with composure. "I thought you might like to have me. I invited Ben Halsey, too; but he wrote that he would be too busy."

Steve threw his wife a look of relief.

"He can't think anything of it as long as Halsey also got a bid," he told her, under cover of Hoyt's congratulations to Fern. "She's got some sense left, you see."

Olive found no comfort in this reflection. It seemed to her that Hoyt must read the girl's infatuation in her eyes as she drew his attention to the lilies of the valley caught gracefully at her young breast.

"I knew they were yours even before I saw the card," she said. "Every one else sent roses."

"Perhaps you would rather have had roses. But I meant a compliment. The lilies seemed to me like your soul—white, all white, and fragrant of the morning."

Fern threw him a tender look.

"I wouldn't have them different for anything," she said. "They are as beautiful as the thought behind them."

To Olive's relief Steve let a gust of laughter into this scented colloquy.

"Don't you stuff Fern's head with nonsense, Hoyt," he charged. "She'll think we ought to have her measured for a halo. She'll pass, as girls run, but she's no saint. Let's have a go at the refreshments."

The gross materialism of this suggestion pained his daughter; but Hoyt had the faculty, so alluring to girlhood, of making the most trivial act seem a form of homage, and brought ices to them with the air of a grandee serving queens. Even Olive, who had known few such attentions, felt the flattery of his manner; but she exercised a strict duennaship and rejoiced when Philippa

Blount brought a tonic breeze to the group which freshened and changed the atmosphere. Hoyt, whom she had never met, was especially affected by her coming. Whether dazzled by the fame of the Blount fortune or chilled by the candor of her clear glance, he held himself with stiff and unnatural reserve while Philippa explained that she could not come to them till night, and at the first opportunity said that he must be going.

Fern's face overclouded.

"But you have seen nothing yet," she objected.

"Nothing!" He showed his white teeth in a brilliant smile. "I have seen what I came to see."

Steve added a perfunctory protest, but Hoyt pleaded an inexorable engagement, and, followed by Fern's mournful gaze, lost himself quickly in the gay-hued crowd.

"I don't see what came over him?" said the girl, naïvely distressed. "I wonder if what I said about the flowers could have offended him?"

"Don't talk such silly rubbish," rebuked her mother, in alarmed impatience. "He probably came because he felt he had to, and took the first chance he could to get away."

"Sensible chap!" put in Braisted, with diplomatic intent. "Why should an able-bodied man want to hang about a round-up like this? I'm going to pike out of here myself as soon as I get the glad signal. No offense to you, Miss Blount," he added, as a gallant afterthought.

Philippa laughed.

"No offense taken," she assured, with a glance at Fern, who dropped disconsolately upon a camp-stool. "I shall 'pike' myself as soon as I can. I've a host of things to do before I dine with you."

Signs of domestic disturbance were plain, and she left the Braisted group to itself; whereupon, having no immediate audience save her family, Fern gave herself frankly over to melancholy. Steve squared his jaw and exchanged glances with Olive.

"Well," he rallied, briskly, "if Fern's education is finished, I move we adjourn. I have a committee-meeting at four, and I dare say that you, Olive, wouldn't object to a little rest at home before the people begin to come."

"I am tired," she admitted. "The carriage can come back for Fern if she isn't ready now. What do you say, my dear?"

The girl rose listlessly.

"I see nothing to stay for," she replied. "We'll go after I've told Abby the usual white lies about hating to leave her. As a matter of fact, I'm delighted."

As they quitted the shadow of the too-massive porte-cochère Olive recalled the forebodings with which she had first left this place. She shrank from asking herself precisely what manner of woman Beauchamp Manor had fashioned. It was too early to forecast the final issue. Fern's

character was still plastic. She might return from the West as unlike the girl who now cherished Hoyt's flowers as that self-absorbed young person was different from the sweet-natured child of last autumn.

But the Fern of the present blurred the outlines of the Fern who might be. The woman of the future might value simplicity; but the restless, fickle girl of the actual hour bowed down to the showy and the complex. A glimpse of the new home was sufficient to banish her vapors, and she trailed past the servant into the neo-classic splendors of the hall with an air of proprietorship which filled her father with delight. With the arrival of the first callers—and the vanguard came soon—she sparkled into abundant life and gaiety.

One of the earliest comers was old Mrs. Tully.

"Not to see the house, my dear, but to watch the others see it," she confessed, frankly. "From what I hear, your first Thursday is likely to be a crush. Two papers besides the *Post* have mentioned it, and as there are two conventions in town you can count on several people you do know bringing others you don't know and don't want to; but there will be amusing specimens to offset the bores. I hope the family skeleton is in a safe cupboard? Nothing that's not under lock and key will escape inspection. It ought to be something like the barbarians taking

Rome, which is one of the events of history I'm genuinely sorry to have missed."

"I'm not much of a Roman," said Olive, finding her one of the sheltered corners in which she delighted. "Perhaps Fern might pass muster."

Both glanced across the great room at the girl, who, all her natural grace to the fore, was making small talk for a tongue-tied congressional family from Idaho which fixed her with a collective bovine stare and responded in throaty monosyllables.

"Yet they've all spent more time in Washington than Fern," said Mrs. Tully.

"They haven't had her schooling."

"It wouldn't matter a pin's worth if they had. You can't make something out of nothing, even with money to blind folks' judgment. And don't give Beauchamp Manor credit for Fern's best qualities. She got those straight from you, my dear. But here comes a fresh instalment of Goths and Vandals. Go and defend your household gods. That emaciated person in stripes would be nosy enough to stick a pin in a cork leg. I caught her hunting for the sterling mark on her teaspoon at one of the embassies last week."

From that moment it deluged visitors as if a dam had burst somewhere without. The few friends who came to see Olive for her own sake, if not turned baffled from the door, found themselves shouldered and trampled by a mob,

sprung no one knew whence, which poured in merely to view her possessions, all the fabled treasures—paintings, sculptures, tapestries, bibelots, architectural splendors—which the brief Colburn régime had heaped together and jealously screened from the general eye. Ranging the house as if it were a public gallery, the throng pried, poked, fingered, and assayed everything in the larger apartments, and was only checked by the servants' vigilance from invading the sleeping-rooms and the kitchens. One hardy explorer, indeed—Creevey afterward described her as thin and striped—by feigning illness, did succeed in penetrating the suite of the rumored sunken bath, which thenceforth became a topic of engrossing interest in circles where sunken baths touch the imagination.

All pretense of serving the tea, which Creevey's British taste prescribed, was abandoned. Even had it hungered, only a miracle could have fed the multitude. But no one thought of food. It was enough to feast the greedy eye at first; then, as the pack grew denser, self-preservation became the ruling passion. Two women fainted in a press about the dining-room fireplace, caused by some one's statement that it had once belonged to a Bourbon king of unsavory reputation; another victim was stripped of her dress-skirt; while a third anonymous martyr—as the bushel of fans, gloves, cheap jewelry, hair-pins, puffs, handkerchiefs, and miscellaneous débris

collected later bore witness—left the field of battle bereft of a luxuriant switch of Titian hair.

For upward of three sweltering hours this endured. Then the tide ebbed, seeping out slowly at first, but presently gathering momentum, and gushing forth with the meaningless force of its influx to leave Olive beached in crimson collapse on a Venetian chair never designed to hold human frame, and Fern, her gown a shapeless rag, but her Abercrombian bearing at its haughtiest, towering like an insulted goddess in the center of the stricken drawing-room.

"Are they all gone?" asked Olive, feebly.

Fern turned a stony countenance upon her.

"We are disgraced," she proclaimed, in hollow tones. "Do you hear me? Disgraced!"

"There, there," soothed her mother, noting her white, strained face. "Go and lie down before you change for dinner. You're all tuckered out, poor child."

"Child!" She pounced upon the endearing word with scorn. "I'm not such a child as to have brought this upon us. We shall be the laughing-stock of Washington, and it's all your fault. Why did you chum with everybody at the hotel, and accept their hideous present, and let us in for this? You might have considered my social future here a trifle. Things shall go differently next year, I promise you. If you're not competent to run this house as it should be run, then I—"

"Fern Braisted!"

The stern note in her mother's voice, her blazing eyes, cowed the rebel. She had experienced nothing like it in her whole petted life.

"You know it's true," she whimpered.

Olive came and laid a heavy hand on her shoulder.

"One word more and, big as you are, I'll spank you," she warned, her voice shaking with mingled grief, anger, and fatigue. "I've had more than flesh and blood can stand."

Fern surrendered forthwith and abandoned the scene in tears; but Olive loathed her victory. The one bright ray in the enveloping gloom was shed by Creevey, who was already mustering his forces to right the universal disorder. He announced that the Moor had come to irreparable harm.

CHAPTER XX

BUT there was the evening to be faced somehow; Steve's smart dinner, that was to show Marshall Blount's daughter how the Braisted household could do things. How any kind of order was to be evolved before the guests arrived she could not conceive; but as she herself nervously began putting this and that to rights, Creevey advised tea or a pick-me-up and bade her have no concern. Despite his assurances, however, she lingered anxiously below, and was as busy as the busiest when the lord of the ravaged domicile came home.

"Oh, Steve!" she exclaimed, as he suddenly loomed over her. "I so wanted to have things tidy before you came! Why didn't you stay out a little while longer?"

"Longer! I'm late now." He stared from her hot face to the dust-cloth in her hand, and thence, with an incensed scowl, toward the servants, who scattered to discreet posts, out of sight, if not of earshot. "What in God's name is the meaning of this?"

"We've had such a mess to clean up, Steve. We've been—"

"Wipe your face," he broke in, angrily. "You're a show."

She mechanically obeyed, using the dust-cloth in all unconsciousness for the purpose till he snatched it from her with an oath.

"Why are you making a nigger of yourself down here?" he demanded. "Haven't we help enough to look after things? If we haven't, I'll hire more. You make me sick! This isn't the truck-farm. We're in Washington and—"

"But you don't know what's happened."

"I don't want to know. Don't you realize that people will be coming here to dinner in three-quarters of an hour, and that you're looking like a chimney-sweep? Have you gone crazy?"

"Yes; crazy like the rest of you," she answered, too spent to explain further. "It is just like a bedlam here, and I might as well be a lunatic, too. It would serve you right if I went straight to bed and let you have your party to yourself."

"Go to bed if you want to," he retorted. "I guess Fern won't have any trouble in filling your place. If she does, Mrs. Estabrook can give her a hint now and then. Turn in, by all means."

She would be present if dying, after that; but her manner left Steve in doubt, and a little later he made an excuse to enter her dressing-room and spy out the situation. Finding her really preparing for dinner, he ventured one or

two amiable remarks on a neutral topic, and, receiving replies equally temperate, handed her a card whereon he had penciled a little diagram.

"The seating arrangement for to-night," he explained, tacitly burying the quarrel after the habit of the long-married. "I forgot to speak of it before. Tully, being an old member of the House, I've given the place of honor beside you, and Estabrook will take your other hand. Their wives will flank me. I don't want Miss Blount to get the idea that she is any better than the others. Any suggestions?"

Olive took up the card, and by this token ratified the peace.

"I would like it better if you hadn't put Fern next to Mr. Hoyt," she said.

"She picked her own place. I had her on the other side of the table."

"What did she say?"

"She said Philippa didn't seem to take to him at the school. I made up my mind that it wouldn't mend matters to argue about it."

"No," agreed his wife. "It only pours oil on the fire. You saw that in Ben Halsey's case."

"Oh, that reminds me," said Braisted, turning at the door. "Now that all that nonsense between him and Fern is done with, I'm thinking of offering Halsey a couple of rooms in the house so I can have him handy. Any objection? He would take his meals out."

"Of course I don't object. But I thought

you expected him to leave you, now that he's been admitted to the bar. Doesn't he intend to take up with Mr. Blount's offer?"

"No. I thought he'd clinch the matter when Blount was in Washington; but he said he'd prefer to stick to me. Sure you don't mind his being in the house?"

"No." The little word veiled a deep satisfaction.

"Then I'll 'phone him now, and he'll probably arrange to come in right away. He has taken a lot of the Tuscarora grind off my shoulders—routine matters, I mean—besides his regular work. He's a smart fellow when it comes to business. You always know where to find him."

At another time the news would have excited her; but the cumulative woes of the day had left her worn and apathetic. So dull did she feel that it failed to rouse her when, on entering the drawing-room, she perceived, by Fern's confusion and Steve's black look, that the girl had been dilating upon "the disgrace." Fearful lest her mother might carry her dire threat of the afternoon into immediate execution, Fern edged nearer her father, who showed signs of impending explosion; but the arrival of the first guests deflected the rising storm, and the Braisted family presented a picture of complete concord when Philippa Blount and the Estabrooks entered together.

"Why, you don't look as if anything had

happened!" exclaimed Mrs. Estabrook, with a comprehensive survey of the room. "You all seem to have your normal number of features and limbs."

"Nothing *has* happened," said Fern, in frosty discouragement of this theme. "Did you finish all your errands, Philippa?"

Mrs. Estabrook was not to be side-tracked.

"But something certainly did happen," she insisted, drowning Philippa's reply. "Everybody is discussing the perfectly shameful way your hospitality was abused. Why, they say a pack of three-day excursionists, who knew neither you nor your friends, flocked in! Those who hadn't heard of the Colburn place at least knew of the Braisted Relish. When I drove up at half-past five, even the carriageway was jammed."

Her husband perceived the topic to be distasteful, and tried to change it.

"The house certainly justifies its reputation," he said, pleasantly. "Tell me about some of these treasures, Braisted. They make the Colonial relics in the National Museum look like goods just off the counter."

"So I only sent in cards," completed his wife, raising her voice. "My gown would have been utterly ruined if I had come in."

Steve gratefully followed Estabrook's lead.

"Some of the things aren't as old as they look," he said, making sure that Creevey was out of

hearing before he stole his thunder. "Lawrence Colburn was played for a sucker several times. There are bogus Roman tear-bottles in that cabinet behind you, for example, and some of the scarabs—those beetle-shaped stones there, Egyptian, you know—are fakes, too. Out in the dining-room there's a wedding chest that looks as if Adam might have given it to Cain; but acids gave it age and birdshot made the worm-holes."

Estabrook looked his surprise.

"I didn't suppose you were up on such things," he said.

"Oh, I'm only a greenhorn," laughed Braisted, deciding to retreat before he exposed his ignorance. "Art got lost in the shuffle when I was educated."

"Modest, as always," said Hoyt, entering briskly. "Our friend Steve knew very well what he was buying here. I am certainly relieved to find this temple of loveliness intact."

Braisted frowned on his latest guest.

"What did you expect?" he retorted. "This isn't a cottage to be upset by a handful of callers."

"A handful! Everybody says you repelled an invasion."

"So I've told him," chimed in Mrs. Estabrook. "I saw the mob about the door myself. Yet they're good-naturedly trying to pretend that a mere handful of people dropped in to tea!"

Creevey entered with a tray of cocktails, and at last the hateful subject seemed buried. Olive had no sooner indulged this hope, however, than the coming of the Tullys heralded its inglorious resurrection.

"We're late—I admit it," wheezed Mr. Tully, mopping his bald head as he trundled across the room to Olive. "But you must blame yourself, Mrs. Braisted. If you will send my wife home, at her time of life, looking as if she had been on a spree, you must take the consequences."

Olive turned anxiously on her friend.

"Oh, I hope you weren't hurt?" she said. "I never caught sight of you after we spoke in the beginning."

"Don't mind that fat man's jokes, my dear," charged Mrs. Tully. "He is at his usual prank —trying to shift his tardiness to other shoulders."

"Of all the ingratitude!" ejaculated her husband. "Why, I only made her lie down—"

"So that you could dawdle," whipped in the sprightly veteran. "I wasn't a particle tired, Olive, and I haven't been so entertained in ages. I could not thank you when I left, for I stepped out of a window."

Fern was aghast.

"You fell?" she cried.

"Not at all. I took a deliberate short cut. I couldn't wait to use the door." Whereupon, noticing her host's face redden with mortification, she added, quickly: "You know we always

left the White House by a window in the old crowded days before the place was remodeled. That was what gave me the idea."

Mr. Tully, with masculine obtuseness, would have continued the theme; but his wife silenced him by an obscure signal, and, Creevey announcing dinner, the belated company filed into the dining-room and allowed the eventful afternoon to sink into historical perspective.

Grateful as was this surcease to Olive, however, it did not tend to enliven the dinner, for no topic of common interest succeeded. The formal magnificence of the great room seemed to strangle the spirit of sociability. Not even that main staple of Washington conversation, ironic gossip of celebrities, which Mrs. Tully introduced, could thrive in this rarefied air, and for several solemn courses Braisted's guests engaged in hushed dialogues with their nearest neighbors. Presently even these efforts one by one flickered out till only the muted voice of Proctor Hoyt, flirting with Fern, was left to cheer the gloom; whereupon, disconcerted for once, he too broke off, and complete silence blanketed the feast.

There was something hypnotic in that pause. Every one sat dumbly, straining to utter some light quip, some frothy piece of persiflage, that would tactfully bridge the chasm, but though one coughed, another blushed, a third played with her rings, a fourth scowled villainously, and all

suffered, an evil spell gagged and tortured the company till Olive, possessed of an idea at last, came desperately to the rescue.

"Creevey," she called, "fetch Mr. Tully some of our own relish. I know he likes it with his roast. Leave it in the jar. It has a better flavor that way."

The chasm was bridged, but at what frightful cost! From that innocent jar which Creevey set before them, Imperial Relish, like a malign genie freed from bondage, poured and poured till it seemed to swamp the universe. Mr. Tully led the way with a gastronomic rhapsody, in which the famous Braisted product echoed and re-echoed like a refrain. No such boon, he concluded, had been added to the pleasures of the table in a generation. Estabrook thereupon indorsed his praise, but took exception to the time limit. Surely a century would not overstate the period? Yet even this would not content Proctor Hoyt. He declared that as a sauce it stood the peer of any in history, and spoke slightingly of the banquets of Lucullus, which had lacked this truly imperial touch of perfection. He added that he personally found it ravishing with fish, a statement which gave a fresh turn and impetus to the discussion. Mrs. Estabrook, it seemed, preferred it with game; Mrs. Tully with the bean of her ancestral Maine; while Philippa Blount remarked that her father's chef had utilized it with splendid results

in the preparation of soup. Then the amazing rise and growth of the business had to be exhaustively debated, and the twin themes of Olive's discovery and Steve's genius for organization gave Hoyt a chance for eulogy to which he did justice till the coming of dessert.

To all this Stephen Braisted listened with a set smile for the talkers and a wrathful eye for his wife, who had dumped the plebeian flood upon him. Olive could perceive nothing amiss in the topic, which was certainly preferable to silence; but she saw plainly that the teeth of her husband and daughter were on edge, and, with Hoyt's peroration, thankfully told herself that the last possible word had been said. At this pass, however, it was given to Mrs. Estabrook to make a discovery.

"Why, you have changed it somehow," she cried, bringing her glasses to bear upon the unlucky jar, which had now journeyed to her place. "What is it you've done to it? I miss something."

Braisted's jaw grew more square.

"They've been experimenting with new labels out at the works," he said, shortly, and signaled Creevey to remove the inexhaustible fount of discussion from the table.

But the paragon was for once dilatory, and the delay was just sufficient for Mr. Tully to solve the riddle.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "It's the picture we

miss—the photograph of Stephen Braisted, which all the world knows so well."

"Steve!" cried Hoyt. "You surely never sanctioned that change! You discharged the wretch who perpetrated it?"

"I can't very well discharge the president of the company."

"You ordered it yourself?"

"Yes."

"What modesty! What—"

"Oh, let's drop business," interrupted Braisted, goaded past endurance. "I got tired of seeing my face everywhere—that's all. It wasn't my idea in the beginning."

"No. It was my fault," avowed his wife, in an unnatural voice which drew all eyes upon her. She had not realized till this moment that he had been swayed by the children's ridicule, and the discovery put her beside herself. The culminating blow had fallen. Steve was ashamed of the thing that had made this pomp possible; he was ashamed of their simple history; yes, ashamed of her. "I talked him into it," she went on, in a colorless monotone. "I thought it was something to be proud of. I wanted him to have the full credit; I wanted people to see what the man looked like who built up the business. But now—" She paused, brushed an uncertain hand across her forehead, then added, wearily, "Oh, life is such a muddle to me!"

She pushed back from the table as she ended,

and Philippa Blount, with quick tact, construed the movement as a signal for rising. Linking her arm into Olive's, she led her from the room with light talk of the first object that met her eye. The older woman appreciated what the girl had done, and, as they presently sat side by side, pressed her hand in silent thanks. Words were for the time being impossible. A lethargy in which nothing much mattered followed her moment of storm, and the voices of the women, gossiping of feminine interests, fell on her dull ear as if muffled by distance.

And it was the same when, reeking of cigar-smoke, the men joined them. The constraint of the dinner-hour had passed; but the chatter and jests and laughter wore an air of unreality. She believed them a sham like her own pretended interest and responses, and told herself that pity for her family and contempt for her were the secret thoughts of all. What booted it that Steve paid ostentatious court to Ada Estabrook, or that Fern and Proctor Hoyt withdrew to far corners? All seemed ghostly shapes in a mist.

By and by she beheld them gathered in the hall for the parting. There was a moment of vague thanks, good wishes, and farewells on the threshold; an embrace from Philippa which should have been Fern's; a kiss from her child which was cold beside the last look she bent upon Hoyt; a nod from her husband, and they

were off. Then Creevey shut the great door and left her to herself.

Gone! All of them! She sank upon one of the stone seats of the white, comfortless hall and stared around with a swift and appalling realization of her loneliness. Somewhere in the distance she heard a murmur of servants' voices; but the sound brought no solace. Paid instruments of luxury, they were as remote as these still marbles in their niches, gods of an earlier time indifferent to human pain. Hot tears shut their serene brutality from sight. Thereupon, when even her own Deity of Compassion seemed to deny her comfort, she felt a warm touch at her fingers, and, opening her eyes, found the ugly muzzle of her son's dog thrust against her knee. Repulsed again and again, whimsical chance sent him now to triumph. The warm tongue at her finger-tips conquered Olive. Fearful no longer, she pressed the grotesque face thankfully to her own.

CHAPTER XXI

IT was long before she slept, and when sleep came it brought no respite from anxiety. Whether she dreamed or stared wakefully into the dark, she ever faced a crisis where old precepts were of no avail. Nor did the dawn bring comfort. She brooded over the still city, watching the great dome turn from gray-pink to ruddy gold; but though all lay steeped in quietness, the scene had no message of peace for her. Vain also was her restless pacing of the awakened house. The strange furnishings at every hand thrust her problem back upon her. Nothing suggested a solution.

After she had made a pretense of breakfasting she went into the formal garden with Eli, self-invited, padding worshipfully at heel; but the fauns and satyrs were as indifferent as the pagan company indoors, and the sporting Tritons, blowing their interlacing streams, teased alike her eye and ear. The trig precision of the spot repelled her. By garden she meant a half-wild, bee-haunted corner given over to lavender and sweet-william, asters and nasturtiums, with sunflowers and hollyhocks standing sentinel by the

wall. Scarcely a bloom brightened this place of gravel, box, and shining stone. Then a river breeze stirred a proper little cypress in a classical jar, and its faint scent awoke a memory, and the memory prompted a desire. Going within, she ordered her carriage, and presently, the dog still attending, she went down to it and bade the man drive to a certain cemetery in a ravine of the outlying hills.

Some obscure racial instinct had all her life led Olive to frequent graveyards. These haunts were never sad to her, and, unless she happened on a burial, seldom suggested death. Peace was the dominant note of their influence, and the place whither she was bound had within its tranquil precincts a spot which touched her imagination beyond any other she knew. Girt by a circle of somber trees that shut it in as jealously as if it lay in a wilderness, this bit of earth contained on the one side a massive stone bench, and over against it, seated on a low pedestal with the severest of backgrounds, the shrouded figure of a woman wrought in bronze. Olive had heard it called by various names, and knew it for a famous work of a man of genius; but she never associated it with its sculptor, or indeed with any human hands. Her own name for the hooded mystery was Resignation, and it was with a craving to search out its secret that she resorted to it now in her hour of stress.

To-day, somehow, it sounded a new note. She had never before looked upon it save toward evening, and this special morning of intense blue sky, warm wood scents, and countless reminders of teeming life from feathered and creeping things, softened the stern melancholy which had hitherto attended the bronze woman's acceptance of events, and bestowed for the hour at least a quiet content in sacrifice. Struck by this change, Olive sat long in half-mystical wonder before the still figure, asking how this boon might become her own. If self-abnegation could earn content, then surely she deserved it. Had she not striven all these last weary months to be unselfish? Her hard-won home was dear to her; but for her family's sake she had left it. The city had daunted and humiliated her; but for their sake she had toiled to adapt herself to its ways. That she might do them credit she had tried to recast her lifelong habit of thought, her faulty speech, even her physical frame; but to what end? Do what she would, she ever fell short of their demand. Where she looked for praise they flouted; when she hoped for respite they told her there must be no turning back. Was this place of strange gods to be henceforth her portion? Must she stand passively by and see her husband and son go mad with Mammon-worship, her daughter pledge body and soul to the Moloch of social ambition? Yet how could she help herself or

them? How could she stay the folly of these bewitched ones who blushed for the source of their uplifting and for her? What word of hers would they heed?

Presently the dog at her feet stirred and lifted his head, and an instant later her less acute ear heard a step on the path outside the green barrier. Then, clad in sober gray, into the little enclosure stepped a woman who started as if at this hour she had felt assured of solitude. Dazed by her long scrutiny of the sunlit statue, Olive did not at once recognize the new-comer; but when, after a second's hesitation, she smiled and advanced with outstretched hand, she identified her as the mistress of the White House.

"Do you come here at this time, too, Mrs. Braisted?" she asked. "It tells another story in the early morning, doesn't it?"

Olive turned again toward the bronze.

"Yes," she answered. "I was thinking a while ago that she looks almost contented, though I can't see why she should. The morning hasn't made any real difference in her lot. Last night's sorrow is still there. But how foolish you must think me," she checked herself. "I talk as if she were alive."

"And so she is, like every work of true genius. It's because of her vitality, her humanity, that she touches and helps us. I like to see her in this rare morning mood, when she expresses something that the sculptor never

intended; but, after all, her other message is the one we need. She was not meant to look contented, you know. But you've heard the story?"

"No."

She told it simply: the well-known story of a husband's terrible bereavement and fathomless grief.

"Agony, despair, hopeless loss—those were the things he charged the sculptor to express, and he has expressed them masterfully. We can't face that woman who has lost without resolving to bear with one another for the little time we are here. She makes us want to be sympathetic and decent and kind while we may."

Olive stared at the statue with a new vision.

"What if I lost them?" she murmured. "What if I lost them?"

Her companion glanced toward her expectantly, but as Olive said no more she herself presently ended the pause.

"You never came back to see me," she said, bending to pet the dog, who, snapping amiably at the dancing gnats, stretched himself at their feet. "I was sorry."

The older woman faced her with a rising flush.

"I was ashamed to go back," she owned, bluntly. "Don't think I wasn't grateful to you for helping me out of my blunder. Oh, I *was* grateful when—when I knew. It made me love you."

"But couldn't you see I wanted you to return?"

"Yes. I believed you meant what you said."

"I did mean it—I mean it still. Red tape is a stifling thing to me. I would dodge it and run away from it always if I could. When someone who dares to be natural tramples it under foot I am glad."

Olive smiled faintly.

"My trampling days are over," she said.

"I hope not."

"You hope not! Would you have me go on blundering?"

"I mean that there are more than enough conventional folk in the world, timid souls who will conform to any silly rule rather than appear odd."

"But I want to be like other people in things that are worth while. Yet what are they? I thought I knew once."

"Ah, so did I. But now it's always an open question. One can't go comfortably about labeling things 'worthy' or 'worthless,' more's the pity! Your meat may be my poison. For instance, I dislike automobiles. But, on the other hand, most of my friends find them a joy and take a vast amount of fresh air they never had leisure for before. And there you are. After all, we must live in our age."

Her chance illustration, following the stern lesson of the bronze, struck home and set Olive

questioning whether she had done her family complete justice. Were the things they prized as harmful as she deemed them? Were they not simply living in their age? And if so, why should not she live with them and meet their problems with sympathy? Here was the root cause of her failure to keep step, the flaw in her sorry attempt to mold herself to her surroundings. She had lacked sympathy, and had therefore gone predestined to defeat; she had been dragged where she should have led. A great unexplored continent of ideas widened before her, and the bracing tonic of a definite purpose filled her whole being with a new energy. There should be no more clinging to the past or shrinking from the future. Whatever they proposed, they should find her open-minded. If she could not feel a sympathetic interest, she would act it.

She turned radiantly on her companion, who had for an interval sat busy with her own thoughts.

"I've found what I came for," she said, exultantly. "Between you"—she nodded toward the statue—"I've dropped my worries."

"And between you, so have I mine!" She rose with a laugh. "You have helped me to see that they were trifles."

"I?" Olive clung for a moment to the friendly hand. "How did I help you?"

"By giving me a chance to talk over my patchwork philosophy. Good-by. I am leaving town soon, but we shall see each other in the autumn.

You'll come back to me then? Promise me that you will?"

"I'd like to see anything keep me away," said Olive.

As her carriage rounded the lofty plateau of the Soldiers' Home, the city, embraced by its shining river, lay before her in a shimmering, transparent veil of summer heat; and as she picked out its salient landmarks shouldering up through the green—the dominating group of Capitol Hill, the soaring obelisk at the farther end of the Mall, the wooded heights of Arlington, the observatory at Georgetown, then, harking back to the lower foreground, the red monotonous reach of the Pension Office, huge like its roll, and the white gracious structures of the newer Washington with definite ideals of civic beauty—it came to Olive that she looked upon the familiar scene with changed eyes. Before this moment she had been its bond-slave; now she felt a free agent who, if she might not turn the tables on her despot, could at least face it on terms of self-respect.

And even as she confronted the city, so she re-entered her own door. When the man who admitted her described the marvel in the servants' hall, he said: "She didn't sidle in like a poor relation; she looked as if she owned the shop, and reckoned it dirt under her feet at that." Thenceforth, from Creevey the Great to the last scullion in his hierarchy, the house-

hold heeded the change and sprang to do her bidding with an alacrity which so far only Steve had been able to inspire. It was Steve himself, however, whom she most wished to impress, and she waited impatiently for his return. Friday brought no word from him, though an unrepentant note came from Fern. The girl made no allusion to their estrangement; but Olive read wounded pride between the lines of her stiff little chronicle of shopping with Philippa and other trivialities. On Saturday Braisted wired for the chauffeur to meet an afternoon train and to bring his motoring clothes along.

Olive was in total darkness as to the meaning of these plans; but she had no doubt about her own. Half an hour after the receipt of the message, which Steve had addressed to Creevey, she entered a shop where fashion spoke its last word and price-marks bore no relation to intrinsic worth. The fruit of this visit, effectively set off by the leather upholstery of Braisted's car, met the eyes of that astounded gentleman as he issued from the railway-station.

"How long since you took to motoring?" he exclaimed, too amazed for other salutation.

Olive underwent his scrutiny calmly, and herself offered no greetings.

"Not long," she said. "My costume is new, you see."

"And expensive, or I'm no judge!" He ran his eye over one or two significant details.

"By Tuscarora standards, yes. But we're not living in Tuscarora now, as you've often said."

His perplexed gaze dropped to her feet, where Eli Yale lay peacefully coiled.

"And when did you get chummy with that brute of S. J.'s?"

Olive bent and stroked the devoted white head.

"Thursday night—after my other chums left," she returned. "But get in, Steve. You are keeping that line of cabs waiting."

He entered the car, but bade Victor halt at the opposite curb.

"I am waiting for Hoyt," he explained, awkwardly. "Business took him over to New York yesterday morning, and so I had his company on the trip back."

His news was as surprising as it was unwelcome; but she hid her feelings.

"How nice!" she said. "Did he see Fern off, too?"

"Nobody saw her off. She's still in New York at the Blounts.'"

"Still in New York!"

"Yes, there was some hitch in the programme. Hoyt says Marshall Blount often changes his plans at the last minute. Fern seems to think they'll go soon. She came down to the Waldorf last night and had dinner with us. I told her to bring Miss Blount, but she came alone.

Fern thought she didn't come because I asked Hoyt. I don't see where she got that idea. S. J. was with us, too," he added, quickly, to head off inquiries as to a chaperonage, which it now struck him had been rather lax. "We took in a show."

"How jolly!"

The honeyed tranquillity of her manner again drew his uneasy stare.

"You don't act a bit natural, Olive," he said, with a shadow of apprehension. "Do you feel well?"

"Never better," she reassured. "What is keeping Mr. Hoyt?"

"He said that he wanted to telephone. If you're in a hurry to get home, we'll—"

"I'm not in the slightest hurry to get home. It's a perfect day for a spin. I quite look forward to it."

Braisted coughed and raked the unpromising scene for inspiration.

"I hardly think you'd care about the jaunt I had in mind," he said. "I didn't dream you'd feel like motoring, and planned to run out to a country club that elected me to membership the other day."

Olive beamed approval.

"I've often wished to see what a country club was really like."

"Of course it won't be very pleasant going with a stag party."

"I sha'n't mind. Such clubs are for all the family, I believe. As for the ride, Mr. Hoyt isn't a stranger, and I'm beginning to know you."

"Eh!" he exclaimed, doubting his ears.

She had her eyes fixed on one of the station exits, and appeared to miss his query.

"If the party seems too lopsided," she added, reflectively, "you might invite another woman to balance me. I dare say we could find somebody at the Walden."

He made a wry face.

"I dare say we could. Say Mrs. Pratt, now! She'd probably enjoy a club dinner at my expense."

"I had Mrs. Estabrook in mind," dropped Olive, quietly. "She is so congenial."

This final experiment in sympathy left Braisted open-mouthed.

"I can't make you out at all," he confessed. "You act as giddy as if you'd had a touch of sun. I wouldn't run round shopping in the heat, if I were you."

Delighted with her progress, Olive was willing that he should spin any theory he pleased. Indifference had vanished from his bearing. He even held himself toward her with the alert deference he paid other women, and she regretted that she had not from the outset spiced their married life with a hint of mystery.

Then Hoyt had his turn. Obviously surprised to see her, his labored greeting came to

an abrupt end as the dog thrust his blunt head to the fore, and in instinctive dislike unfleshed his tusks. Yet Hoyt's expression at this pass was an impassive mask beside the face he turned on Olive when she asked him why he had not brought his pretty friend along.

"My pretty friend?"

"We can put her down wherever she likes."

Steve pricked his ears.

"What's that, Olive?"

"It seemed a pity for Mr. Hoyt to send any friend of his home in a stuffy cab when we have all this room to spare."

Struck by Hoyt's manner, Braisted prodded him with a playful forefinger.

"Pretty woman? Cab? What's all this mystery, anyhow?"

Hoyt shrugged as if he could not flatly contradict one of the softer sex.

"Perhaps I have a double," he suggested.

"A double, eh? Well, that's less inconvenient than a double life."

Having achieved this piece of repartee Braisted gave his handiwork an admiring guffaw. His merriment found no echo in Hoyt, but Olive smiled, and her smile was dry.

CHAPTER XXII

OLIVE was certain that she had made no mistake. As the car had glided to the farther curb her casual glance had traveled past a vanload of trunks toward one of the station exits, and for an instant spied Hoyt and the manicurist among the jostling crowd. At the instant her eye fell upon them they were talking angrily together, she with sullen bravado, he with a mixture of authority and entreaty. What it signified Olive could not fathom, nor was it clear to her why she had let him know that she penetrated his deception. It was seemingly born of instinct, like Eli's curl of lip.

She felt that Hoyt kept furtive watch upon her, and was not surprised to have him allude to her discovery when Steve presently left them for a moment at a garage.

"You were not mistaken," he said, quietly.

"I know it," she answered. "My sight is excellent."

"I was still upset at meeting that woman when you questioned me. We had quarreled. Perhaps you saw that, also?"

"Yes."

"She is a woman I have helped along with money now and then. But she depends on me too much, and I have lost patience. She is making herself a nuisance."

His dark eyes met hers boldly as he made this glib explanation. She believed it a falsehood; but she turned the subject with a commonplace reply and assumed a care-free smile for the returning Steve.

"And now the Walden," she directed. "I'm sure we'll find Ada at home. She makes it a point to nap every afternoon. An excellent idea it is, too."

Braisted's face wore the look of dazed concern that had swept over it at the station.

"Just as you say," he returned, meekly.

Alighting at the hotel, she learned that Mrs. Estabrook was in her room, and, going up-stairs unannounced, she came upon the lady indulging in a sly cigarette.

"Are you surprised at me?" asked the culprit, gaily.

"Not at all," said Olive.

"You're not?"

"I've often smelled tobacco on you. It seems to cling to the hair."

"Bless me! I must be more careful. But how do you know it wasn't due to my husband?"

"He only uses cigars."

Mrs. Estabrook laughed.

"What a bright-eyes you are!" she said.

"Yes, Dan has staid ideas about cigarettes and women both, and I seldom smoke before him. Personally, I can't see why any rational pleasure that men enjoy should be denied to us. American men are so daft about womanly women that it's a comfort at times to talk to a broad-minded foreigner. But what a sweet costume you're wearing. I've just bought some new motoring things myself that I haven't had a chance to use."

Olive told her that an opportunity was at hand, and with secret amusement watched the comedy of her toilet. Without a shred of vanity herself, this middle-aged flirt's constant parley with the mirror stained her cheek with a vicarious blush for the follies of the sisterhood. If Ada Estabrook had been a débutante prinking for her first ball she could have expended no more pains. Had it been a month or two ago Olive would have suspected her of dressing for Steve; but she had latterly grasped the truth that Mrs. Estabrook's monomania embraced the whole male sex.

"Proctor Hoyt will be with us," she said, by way of testing that particular male's standing in the lady's catholic regard.

"Will he?" The change of intonation was marked. "I'm so glad. He is such good company when he lets himself go."

"Does he ever do that?"

"Oh, often with me." She skilfully guided a hat-pin into its proper channel. "He seems to

feel that he can be his real self. It's a wonderful thing to have a strong man reveal his real self to you, Mrs. Braisted."

"I dare say."

"Especially such a man as Proctor Hoyt. He makes me think of Cecil Rhodes. He has such a breadth of vision; his dreams are such great dreams."

Olive felt that she skirted the edge of a revelation. What did the woman know? Could it be that, barring her out, Steve and this man had admitted Mrs. Estabrook to their confidence?

"Dreams and business don't usually mix," she returned, carelessly. "But Steve believes that Proctor Hoyt will amount to something yet."

"Oh, don't put it that way," protested Mrs. Estabrook, drawing on her gloves. "He amounts to a great deal already. Napoleon in Corsica was Napoleon. A few months from now—" she stooped to flick a raveling from her gown, and with bated breath Olive hung on her conclusion—"a few months from now our Corsican may be anything. I'm ready at last. Do you suppose the men have reached the swearing stage?"

On the contrary, the men appeared quite content with the delay. They had strolled up the street, and were so engrossed that the chauffeur sounded his horn twice before they turned.

Mrs. Estabrook rallied them on their ungallant abstraction.

"Two women discussing spring styles couldn't

look more absorbed," she said. "What *are* you talking about?"

"What do people usually talk about in this town?" parried Braisted.

"Politics, for one thing."

"Yes?"

"And the glories of Washington. There really aren't any other topics."

"There's more than a little truth in that," said Hoyt. "I suppose it's a sign that Washington is becoming a world capital."

Olive felt that they were all in a game to hoodwink her. Mrs. Estabrook was probably well aware what they had discussed, and only feigned ignorance because she had chatted too freely above stairs. Yet it was by no means clear why she should be party to their enterprise. Men with a real secret could scarcely pitch upon a sillier confidante.

Meanwhile the car gathered speed, and she recalled that she was now an enthusiastic motorist, and tried to look the part. As a matter of fact, she did suffer less than on the memorable ride to Mount Vernon. She wisely fixed her eyes, not on the death-courting beings in the way, but upon the fleecy summer clouds, distant trees, anything remote enough to let her ignore the reckless dance of the nearer landscape. Moreover, the dog, which had added to the discomforts of the earlier ordeal, now lay quietly at her feet, an adoring friend.

The country club, a pleasant spot of wide piazzas and lovely rural vistas, they found peopled with a bright-hued company drawn by the brilliant weather. The links, the tennis courts, the lawns, the restaurant were all gay with well-fed, if not infallibly well-bred, beings of assured income, and Olive, who ever watched others' emotions more than her own, saw Steve instantly preen, swell, and take on a majesty befitting this fine-feathered gathering; an endeavor in which he was ably sustained by Mrs. Estabrook. She herself would have felt like a barnyard fowl among peacocks but for the moral prop of her new automobile costume.

"I'm glad you bought it, Ollie," her husband took occasion to whisper. "Did you see that bunch of swells on the side porch sit up and take notice?"

"No! Did they really?" she asked, absurdly pleased.

"Yes. I heard one woman say it looked French enough for packing—if you know what that means?"

The awakened Olive saw and seized a chance for wholesome discipline.

"Mercy, what a break!" she admonished. "You should be more careful here in Washington, Steve. What the woman said was 'Paquin'—my coat is a Paquin model."

Braisted gasped.

"How should I know what the dratted lingo meant?"

"Ask me when you are not sure," said his wife.

They encountered nobody with whom they had more than a bowing acquaintance; but their party was sufficient unto itself, and the little dinner went off with an ease and sparkle which made the sad function of Thursday night seem funereal. No small part of this gaiety was due to Mrs. Estabrook, who, still adhering in practice to her dictum that the rational pleasures of men should be enjoyed by women, outdid even Proctor Hoyt in appreciation of the topaz, ruby, amber, and emerald array of liquids which Steve held that no properly appointed dinner could do without. But in the sequel, while Hoyt rose blithely at the suggestion of a stroll in the gloaming, a wholly irrational lassitude seized upon his table companion, which led her to express a discreet preference for some quiet veranda nook whence she and Olive might overlook their progress.

"The fact is," she confided, as the men took themselves off, "I had a tiny sip too much, and it's gone to my feet. My head is as clear as a mountain book."

"You mean brook, don't you?"

"But I said brook—mountain brook," insisted Mrs. Estabrook. "Don't you hear well?"

"Not always," pacified Olive. "Suppose we move into those sheltered corner seats out of the draught?"

"It was imprudent of me, of course," admitted Mrs. Estabrook, from the comforting depths of a steamer-chair; "but they all looked so pretty in the glass. I always think of poor dear Keats's line about the 'beaded bubbles winking at the brim.' My husband says I ought to take the wink as a signal to stop; but poetry is thrown away on him. A lot of things are thrown away on him," she added, plaintively. "I am myself. I guess you see that. Everybody sees it. Why, I might have married any man. I thought Dan was going to have a career; but it wasn't in him. He can't even earn money enough to do things in the right way. I don't know how we'd manage if I hadn't a little property in my own name. I've always hung on to it, no matter what Dan owed. A good thing I have, too! Proctor says it will be my salvation." She boggled over her last word, introducing a superfluous "h" that arrested the flow of her thought. "Beaded bubbles," she repeated carefully, as a test. "I couldn't possible have said book for brook. You really ought to see a specialist about your hearing, Olive. You'll let me call you Olive, won't you? There shouldn't be any formality in our little group. We must hang together or we'll hang separately as dear—dear old somebody said."

Olive started. What did the fool mean by that?

"Should there, Olive?"

"No, no," she replied, absently.

"Say no, Ada, or I'll be offended."

"No—Ada."

Would she not be justified in learning what she could? Perhaps a single prompting word would cause this brimming fount of information to overflow. Yet could she in honor trade upon a silly woman's unguarded moment? Then, as honor said no, Mrs. Estabrook obligingly canceled the difficulty.

"Lumber!" she said, musingly. "How unromantic it sounds! Yet what a tremendous lot it means to us! I couldn't grasp it at first. It took Proctor Hoyt to make me see what a Golconda it is. What a man! The minute I laid eyes on him I felt that he was a born captain of finance. How did you feel, Olive?"

"I?" She roused herself. "Oh, I don't know. He seemed capable."

"Capable! My dear lady, if Morgan or Rockefeller did what he is doing you'd call it genius. If the Government knew—" She paused and fixed her auditor with a look of abysmal caution. "How do I know you're really one of us?" she demanded.

Olive heeded scruples no longer. She must get to the bottom of this thing at any cost. For all their sakes she must know whither they were bound. Then her mind leaped to an intuition.

"Will the name Marshall Blount do for a password?" she returned, coolly.

Mrs. Estabrook gave a little laugh of relief.

"You are in the know, aren't you? Something made me think you weren't. I guess they didn't want us to talk it over. Silly of them, wasn't it?"

Olive agreed with her.

"And we won't let them know we've discussed it," she added. "They may begin to keep things dark we want to hear."

Mrs. Estabrook hailed the suggestion with warm approval.

"I'm sure they don't tell us everything as it is," she stated, with an aggrieved pout. "Of course, the money I've put in is nothing compared with what Steve—you don't mind if I call him Steve, do you?"

"Call him anything you like," said Olive, hastily. "You were speaking about the money you'd invested."

"Oh yes. I don't suppose Dan would call it an investment, he's so conservative. He knows nothing about it, of course. Why should he? Isn't the money my own? He'll open his eyes when I get it back several times over. I can hardly wait to wave the check in his face. But, dear me," she exclaimed, smothering a yawn, "I am positively getting sleepy in this lovely country air."

This did not suit Olive. There were many obscure points she wanted made clear while this expansive mood lasted.

"I haven't a ghost of an idea when the deal is to go through?" she remarked, truthfully. "Have you?"

"No. I've asked over and over again, but I'm none the wiser. At first Proctor said it would surely be this spring, but now it looks like fall. There has been trouble—do pardon my yawns!—trouble over titles and things that eat up money and still more money. Do you mind if I take a nap? I simply can't keep my eyes open. I wonder if it was the salad? Some people say lettuce is narcotic."

CHAPTER XXIII

STARING into the dusk, Olive strove to set her thoughts in order. The piazzas thinned out, the chatter of foyer and restaurant waned, the lamps of homing motors wound in a long pageant down the drive; but on the links two ruddy points of light continued to mark the bench where, heedless of time, Steve and his guest smoked uncounted cigars and plotted—what?

It was like a dissected puzzle. Here a piece, there a piece, offered a tantalizing clue. They were playing for great stakes, it was certain. Her husband's hints and this silly sleeper's babble made that fact plain. Money—there was no telling how much—had been spent to gain still more money. What Mrs. Estabrook had meant by "lumber" she could not guess. That section of the puzzle would not fit into place. It was clear enough, though, that these queerly assorted schemers had obtained control of something of value to Marshall Blount, something of value, perhaps, to the Nation. "If the Government knew—!" What else could that allusion mean? Was Steve, a sworn servant of the people, trying to overreach his masters?

The lights down by the putting green shifted position, and began to zigzag toward the clubhouse, and she shook Mrs. Estabrook awake to provide the conversational small change of which she knew herself bankrupt. She feared that if she spoke at all her alarm would betray itself, and she still knew too little for that. Her new attitude toward Steve was the only one that could avail.

The wisdom of this course justified itself before she slept. Braisted was in fine fettle during the homeward ride, and even after they dropped the others continued to chat in the old spirit of comradeship which had so eased the burden of their lean years. The same genial humor, moreover, possessed him an hour later when, some errand taking her past the library door, she spied him poring over an atlas.

"See here, Ollie," he called.

She went to his side.

"Yes, Steve."

"Let me show you something."

She saw that the volume lay open at the map of a far Western State which had been one of the geographical bugaboos of her childhood.

"I never could pronounce those Indian names," she said.

The man's blunt forefinger made a slow excursion among the pink, green, and yellow county divisions.

"There it is," he said, coming to a halt.

"What?"

"Opportunity. Wealth for the taking—enormous wealth."

She realized that here beyond doubt was the Golconda of Ada Estabrook's vague boasts; but she held herself in check.

"Mines?" she queried.

"Yes; mines, too."

"Too?"

"I mean that there is timber first of all—trees such as you never lay eyes on here in the East. The best we can show are second growth. This is the forest primeval kind of thing that Bryant wrote about."

"It was Longfellow."

"Was it? Well, no matter. The important point is that it's timber of the first quality just begging to be marketed. And look here!" His finger navigated a winding stream and came to anchor in a bright blue gulf. "That's the route to tidewater—a river that is a river."

He looked up smilingly for her appreciation of the stirring theme, and she, remembering her resolve, smiled bravely back.

"Anybody would think you'd actually seen it, Steve."

"I've been there in my mind times enough. But timber isn't the whole story. You guessed mines, and you guessed right. There's iron there, and coal—no telling how much. And there's water-power. Think of it! Lumber, iron, coal,

water-power—any of them spells riches. Combined—" He shut his fist in graphic illustration.

She trembled at that gesture. It was lawless, predatory, cruel.

"But if you know about it, other people must," she said, quietly, after a moment.

He gave a chuckle of triumph.

"Not so many as you'd think. Even the conservation cranks have somehow overlooked the real value of this tract in laying out their fool parks. It's covered by homestead rights in the the usual way, and those rights, Ollie, belong to me."

"To you?"

"They don't stand in my name, of course. It's getting so a Congressman has to hide his business interests. I've had to act through somebody else, and that somebody you can easily guess is Proctor Hoyt. You've never appreciated what a head he has on him, Ollie. He's the chap who has gathered in those homesteaders' claims. He was still-hunting them when I first met him, over a year ago, but handicapped for funds. I fixed that part all right, and he did the rest. There's not much worth while outstanding; but such as it is we propose to have it before we make our big move."

"Do you mean that you are going into the lumber business?"

"That will depend on my distinguished asso-

ciate," he said. "I'll take an active hand if he says the word; but I rather think he'll buy me out. Marshall Blount has never had a real partner."

"So that's why you've been so keen to know him? You want to interest him in lumber?"

"Interest him! That's good. Why, Blount is a secret backer of the Lumber Trust. God only knows how this thing has got by him; but it has. I've nailed down something he needs—something that Marshall Blount will be keen to buy." He rose to his full height and threw back his shoulders. "Not many men have been in a position to say that. To be able to say it means that Steve Braisted has moved up among the powers that be."

She knew not what to say to him, and her silence misled him.

"You mustn't take it hard that I haven't let you into the secret before," he went on. "I had to keep it under my hat. The slightest leak might have spoiled everything. Besides, Ollie, you're a different woman after a winter in Washington. You take a broader view of things. You're more up-to-date." He paused for a look of critical approval. "By George, I believe you're thinner, too! Why, you must be ten pounds lighter than you were last fall."

"It's nearer twenty," said Olive, not without pride.

"What's done it?"

"Turkish baths, for one thing. Mrs. Tully advised them." She did not mention that another potent cause was worry.

"I guess I'll try them myself when I'm less rushed; but it isn't easy to prophesy when that will be. Hoyt and I still have a pile of work cut out for us."

Hoyt, always Hoyt! Bewildered by details which, like everything pertaining to "big business," were a mystery, she nevertheless grasped one basic fact. Whatever its true character—crooked or straight—this whole ambitious fabric had for its keystone a man whom her intuition bade her distrust. How could she tactfully warn her husband to be watchful?

But Steve's thoughts had already surged into another channel.

"Halsey seemed mighty glad of my offer of rooms here," he said. "Has he sent his things over yet?"

"Yes, this morning. He is up-stairs now."

"Good. I'll see if he is still awake and get in touch with affairs out at the works. It's wonderful the way Ben has mastered the details of the business. I seldom have to bother with the Tuscarora mail."

Olive was reminded that several letters lay unopened on her desk, and she returned to her sitting-room and searched the pile in the hope that Fern might have written again. There was, indeed, a letter, and its tone was as contrite as

the girl's previous letter was hard. Something had melted her, and while the mood lasted she had confessed her shortcomings and begged forgiveness like the Fern of simpler days. If her mother could have believed that Hoyt had no part in it she would have been supremely happy, but reason told her that he might very well be the magnet that attracted her homesick thoughts toward Washington.

Yet, be its inspiration what it might, the precious scrawl brought comfort, and Olive read it again and again before she hid it near her heart. Then, absently sifting the other letters, begging appeals like the bulk of her mail since she had come under this roof, she opened a note in a hand she did not recall till, amazed at the first line, she turned the sheet and found the signature of Philippa Blount.

"I have serious things to tell you about the man you know as Proctor Hoyt," it ran. "I can't write them. They are mixed in with personal affairs in such a way that—well, I just can't write them, that's all. Don't let this letter frighten you. I only want to put you on your guard till I can see you and speak plainly. I am not sure yet how I am to have a talk with you; but I think I know a way. Don't leave Washington for a day or two unless I ask you to meet me somewhere."

The girl's pen had raced over the paper as if she were distraught, and Olive caught the very

atmosphere in which the letter must have been written. Reading it with her heart in her throat, its impetuous script swimming before her eyes, she was slow in discovering that a word at the bottom directed her to a postscript within.

"I feel," she read on, "that I owe you more convincing evidence than my word that I know about this man's past, and I will send you a photograph of him taken a few years ago. The woman in the picture you will probably recognize. Don't worry about Fern. Wounds heal quickly with the young."

That last sentence burned itself into Olive's brain; but it was not of Fern she thought. It was of Steve, who was no longer young. What of his wounds? How would he bear disillusion, exposure, perhaps ruin?

There was a step in the corridor, and she crammed the letter into a drawer of the desk. Steve must not see it yet. But it was the butler who passed the half-open door. An idea struck her, and she called him.

"I am expecting a package, Creevey. Are you sure none came with my mail?"

"Yes, madam."

"It might have been given to Mr. Halsey with the business letters."

"There were no parcels to-day, madam, except those in Mr. Braisted's Congressional post, which looked like printed matter. I will ask Mr. Halsey, if you wish."

"No," she said, controlling her voice, for he seemed to mark her eagerness. "This package would not have been sent to the Capitol. When it does come, see that I get it at once."

"Yes, madam."

Then Steve came whistling back from his talk with Ben, and she left the amazing letter in its place of concealment for the night.

CHAPTER XXIV

ALL Sunday she could think of nothing but the coming photograph. During the forenoon she had Creevey send to the general post-office for the mail, which in the usual course of things would reach the house Monday morning; but he reported that no parcel had been received. It was odd, but not inexplicable. She reminded herself that Philippa would be apt to register so important a piece of evidence, and resigned herself to wait until the morrow.

But the breakfast budget brought nothing, and the successive deliveries of the morning yielded merely advertisements, more begging letters, and a note from Mrs. Tully asking her to lunch with her on Tuesday by way of farewell. The afternoon, too, dragged emptily till four o'clock, when she resolutely planted herself in an alcove of the imposing library with a book. This seemed to pique Fate, for she could have read the first paragraph no more than thrice when Creevey bore down on her with a silver tray.

"I brought it at once, madam, as you requested," he said.

"Thank you, Creevey."

He handed her shears and lingered near as if to help; but she extinguished him with the new look of authority, which excited wonder in the servants' hall, and he promptly withdrew.

She was all trembling eagerness when alone. In nervous haste she tore off the outer wrapper, and the evidence which was to brand Proctor Hoyt an impostor lay before her bewildered eyes. Stretching quite across the card, a diagonal crack marred the portraits beyond all hope of recognition. Bodies there were, but featureless bodies that might belong to any man and woman who had the sentimental whim to face a camera together. The one dim clue to their identity lay in the name and address of the photographer, and these, alas, were written in a foreign tongue that mocked her defective schooling.

Then the soft-footed Creevey reappeared with the card of Mrs. Pratt. Olive slipped the ruined photograph into her bosom and went down, striving mightily to mold her face into the cordial mask of the perfect hostess whom no catastrophe disturbs.

"I hope you will pardon my informality," said Mrs. Pratt, who looked only less formal than the grand marshal of a civic parade. "Of course this is not your day, but I am leaving town to-morrow, and did so want another of our little chats before I go."

Olive murmured something agreeable, and while the caller detailed her summer plans asked herself how Philippa could have wrapped her package so carelessly.

"May I ask if it's true that the Walden memento is hopelessly ruined? When I came Thursday it was intact, and I thought lent a beautiful touch of color against the marble background; but a friend who was here late said that she was sure she stumbled over one of the Moor's arms in the street."

"Oh, the umbrella rack!" Olive wrenched her thoughts back to her visitor. "Yes. It was smashed to pieces. But I shall never forget it," she added, fervently, and again attacked the riddle of the broken picture. It was not like Philippa; she was so competent, so clear-headed—

"It is sad to think of an object of beauty as utterly destroyed," continued the tormentor. "But, after all, it was the spirit of the gift that counted."

"So I think," assented Olive, relieved that Mrs. Pratt did not suggest raising funds for a duplicate.

"Just as it was the spirit of your invitation, rather than your reception, that we Walden friends enjoyed."

"You couldn't be expected to enjoy being crushed."

"I trust you acquit the official ladies of any

responsibility for the vulgar scenes that occurred?"

"Of course." Her attention strayed again. What if Philippa had taken every care; what if some one had tampered with the package? Who could have had the motive or the opportunity?

"I am jealous of the social repute of the House of Representatives," said the gadfly.

Olive gazed into the thin, punctilious face with a far-away stare. Could Creevey have done this thing? He had had the opportunity, certainly. But what could be his motive? Then, in a flash, her memory evoked that chance glimpse of Proctor Hoyt with his arm thrown familiarly across the servant's shoulders. And it was Hoyt who had recommended Creevey! The butler might be his confederate, his spy. He had seen her thrust Philippa's letter out of sight; he could have laid hands on it that night; he could have intercepted the package. Why in the name of common sense had she not examined the wrapper?

"I *said*," repeated Mrs. Pratt, crisply, "that I am jealous of the social repute of the House of Representatives."

"Yes, naturally," agreed Olive, with a guilty start. "Don't you think it's very close here? Suppose we go to the library, where we'll feel the breeze from the river? I'll order some tea, unless you prefer a cold drink?"

The guardian of the fair name of the House of Representatives chose tea, and was mollified.

"Personally, I was sure that you would not harbor Thursday's indignity against us," she declared, as they left the room; "but one or two people—I won't say whom—thought that after such an experience you would become as exclusive as the Colburns. I've always replied, 'You don't know Olive Braisted.'"

"That was good of you."

"Oh, I was glad to do it. I know that when another season brings new interests and new friends into your life, you'll still remember the Walden."

The sentence which began so firmly with "I know" came to its end with the rising inflection of imperfect faith; but Olive allayed her last anxiety.

"You will always seem the Old Washingtonians to me," she promised.

"How like you to say it," beamed the caller.

As they entered the library, Olive's glance flew to the waste-basket where she had dropped the wrapper. Empty! As if anticipating her action, the last incriminating scrap had been removed. She pressed an electric button, and when Creevey, statuesque and impeccable as ever, stood before her, she was for an instant tempted to ask him for the wrapper if only to read his face; but she prudently forebore and merely ordered tea.

At peace as to the future, Mrs. Pratt allowed her faculties to relax in light gossip for half an hour more; but Olive kept a tighter rein on her errant thoughts, and when the visitor left at last it was with increased pride in her own social gifts, to which, more than any other agency, she attributed the change wrought in Mrs. Braisted during the season now closing. It would have astounded her to hear that she had betrayed this opinion to her pupil, and, even were she told, it is doubtful if she would have believed her tact at fault. Happily, Olive thought of her oftenest in the indubitably tactful moment of the presentation of the Moor, and this was the kindly memory which in good time effaced the boredom of her farewell call.

In the vital present she forgot her before she gained the street, for Creevey, ushering out the social arbiter with becoming state, opened the door to a far more significant visitor. Olive, who, after the hospitable fashion of Tuscarora, had come to the hall with her caller, peered at the new-comer as if she doubted her eyes.

"Philippa!" Then, remembering Creevey in the background, she confined herself to commonplaces till they reached her room. "Now!" she said, and held out her arms.

To her astonishment the girl flushed deeply and drew back.

"You'll not want to touch me, Mrs. Braisted, when I've told you everything."

"My dear!"

"It's true."

"I can't believe that." She took her by the hand and led her to a seat beside her. "How did you manage to come to Washington? Does Fern know?"

"Nobody knows. Our trip is still delayed, and Fern went early this morning to spend a day and night with one of the Beauchamp girls who lives in the Jersey suburbs. I made an excuse of the Philadelphia milliner I sometimes go to, and left home just after Fern. I *did* stop and see the milliner between trains. I owed it to my conscience—my queer conscience that hasn't balked at far greater deceits. I don't know how to tell you what I have come to tell. It's so—so humiliating."

"Leave that part out," said Olive, promptly.

"I can't. If I don't confess my motive I'll seem even worse than I am. Mrs. Braisted, I've known for months that Proctor Hoyt wasn't good enough for Fern."

"For months!"

"Ever since I saw him first here in Washington. I had never laid eyes on him before—I had always heard him called another name; but I knew him by his photograph, the photograph I sent you. You can see for yourself that I couldn't be mistaken. He looks just as he did in Venezuela when he eloped with my sister."

"With your sister! What are you saying?"

Philippa turned and stared.

"Didn't you realize that the woman in the picture is my sister? I thought that after what I told you at Mount Vernon—"

"Look!" Olive snatched the photograph from its hiding-place and thrust it into her hands. "What could I—what could anybody—make of that?"

"It came like this—broken, unrecognizable?"

"Yes."

"And after all my care! I can't account for it."

"I can," said Olive, grimly. "But go on. This Hoyt, as he calls himself, is the man you mentioned at Mount Vernon, the scamp your sister divorced?"

"Yes."

"And you knew then that he was the man?"

"Yes." She bent her head. "I have said that I knew all along."

"Yet you let my Fern go on making a fool of herself over him?"

"Yes."

"You'd even have let her marry him if things had gone that far?"

"I don't know." She began to weep as a statue might, stonily. "I don't know."

Olive sprang to her feet and glowered down at her.

"Why did you do this thing?"

The girl hid her face in her hands.

"Why?" repeated the older woman, harshly.

"Can't you—can't you guess?" came the muffled voice. "Remember how I met you that day at school. I told you that I had heard of you through—through— Oh, you *must* understand."

Olive did understand, and the knowledge softened her instantly.

"You poor motherless child!" she cried, dropping beside her and gathering her to her breast. "So you wanted Ben—our Ben! I've been blind, simply blind."

Presently Philippa straightened.

"You must hear the rest of it—"

"No, no, dearie."

"But you must. You think I'm strange and hard and unwomanly. I want you to realize that I've had to think things out by myself. I have a horror of the average rich girl's fate. I don't want to be married for money. I want love, happiness. When I met Ben Halsey and we became friends, such good friends, I thought the way lay clear before me. I saw to it that father got to know him. I made him promise Ben a position when he should be ready for it. Father understood me perfectly, and he was willing to help. He would do anything rather than have me repeat Maud's mistake. Then—then Fern came to Washington, and I saw that Ben was fond of her. I didn't know that they were pledged

to each other. I only saw that she attracted him, and I did everything I could to stop it. That was why I asked her to New York for the Christmas holidays—to get her away. That was why—I must be honest with you—I asked her to go West this summer. But it was not the same, this second time. She had become lukewarm toward Ben. Her mind was full of Proctor Hoyt. And I—I did what you know. The temptation was too strong to resist. I did not think she would marry him. I hoped not. I only wanted it made plain to Ben that she no longer cared for him. You asked me if I would have let her marry Hoyt, and I told you that I did not know. That's true of things as they were up to last week. Since I left Washington I have come upon facts that were new to me. One of them I learned the very night we went to New York. We talked for a long time in our stuffy state-room—it was too hot to sleep—and Fern spoke freely of both Hoyt and Ben Halsey. That was the first time I heard of the understanding between her and Ben."

"It was merely that, not an engagement," Olive found herself saying.

Philippa flashed her a look of wondering gratitude.

"You're the most generous woman in the world," she returned. "But I realize now, as I realized that night, that Ben has never cared for me as I hoped he might care. I didn't see

right away, though, that I was beaten. That came the next day, when I learned things about Hoyt that showed me I must make a clean breast of it all to you. Friday I shopped and lunched with Fern, and then left her at the Waldorf with her brother, who had come down from New Haven, while I went home to superintend my packing. At the house I found Maud just in from a house-party at Lenox and on her way somewhere else. She was bursting with news, and wanted to talk. She talked to me more intimately than she'd ever done before, and, by and by, as she had an errand at her safe deposit vault and still felt gossipy, we motored down together. The trust company was in lower Broadway, and on our way back a block in the traffic below Grace Church forced us off among the dingy little streets near Washington Square. It's rather a foreign quarter, and as we passed a restaurant where people were eating, Continental fashion, in the open air, we both got a clear view of a man and woman who were quarreling over their meal. At any rate, they looked angry, and had eyes for no one else. One was a woman I have seen on the street here in Washington. The other was the man we call Hoyt. My sister married him under the name of Purcell—Alan Purcell."

"Was the woman a blonde of the English type?"

"Why, yes. How could you know?"

"I've seen her here, too," said Olive, who read a new meaning into the scene she had surprised at the railway station. "Were you both sure it was Hoyt?"

"Maud hadn't any doubt. She said that she, if anybody, ought to know her former husband when she saw him. I wasn't so certain, for of course I had left him here in Washington, but we had no sooner returned home than Mr. Braisted 'phoned, asking me to dinner, and mentioned that Hoyt would be in the party. That's not the main point, though. The important thing was the effect of that encounter on Maud. She was moody all the way home, and I soon learned the reason. Although she had just become engaged to another man—this was her great news—she was jealous, furiously jealous, of that woman with the bleached hair she had seen with her ex-husband. I can't understand it; I suppose I'm not one of the 'primitive' women the novelists talk about; but there it was, a fact, and while it lasted she flamed out with terrible details of their life together. I'd known very little about her marriage. I was too young when it happened to hear it discussed. I had merely heard that she had gone down with father to visit that horrible lake of pitch which has made us rich and miserable, and that there she met and married this Hoyt, or Purcell, who was in the asphalt company's employ. It was left for Maud to tell me of his brutality during the

half-year she spent with him in a Venezuelan city. I hadn't dreamed that, any more than I had dreamed that he had misappropriated funds, and only escaped jail because father paid the money himself to avoid scandal. You believe me, don't you?"

"Absolutely."

"I saw at once that I must come to you. I don't mean on Fern's account. I could have exposed Hoyt to her—and I will expose him—without leaving New York. It is of Mr. Braisted that I am thinking now, for Fern mentioned that he is associated with Hoyt in some business matter. You mustn't let it go on. You must tell your husband the sort of man he is dealing with and get rid of him. Why not have him see father?"

"See your father?" For an instant Olive clung hopefully to the suggestion. Then she perceived its impossibility. Steve could not meet Marshall Blount in this way.

"Why not?" pressed the girl "Father would be glad to advise him. Go back with me tonight—both of you."

"Thank you, my dear," she replied, "but we must face this by ourselves. I must ask you to say nothing to your father about it."

"Of course I'll say nothing, if you prefer."

"I do prefer."

"I promise, then." She slipped her hand into Olive's. "And you—you won't speak of

me to Fern; of this visit, of the things I have confessed to you?"

"Never!"

"It isn't that I would so much mind her knowing," she said; "but if she knew, it would some day get to Ben. I couldn't bear that. I—I couldn't." She rose with a gesture of weariness that went straight to Olive's heart. "Good-by. Think as kindly of me as you can."

Olive caught her to her breast.

"Think kindly of you!" she echoed. "I love you as if you were my very own."

There was yet another ordeal awaiting Philippa under that roof. As they passed down the corridor she came face to face with Halsey.

"Why, hello, Phil!" he said, as if she were a masculine friend.

"Hello, Ben!" Her voice was steady, even if the hand that lay in Olive's trembled.

"Is Fern here, too?" he asked.

"No; but I'll be seeing her to-morrow. Any message?"

He hesitated, and for a dark moment Olive thought he would indeed make the wretched girl his messenger.

"No," he said, finally. "I think not. Good-by, Phil."

"Good-by, Ben." And with head erect she went her way.

CHAPTER XXV

BY morning, feeling beyond her depth, Olive decided to appeal to Estabrook. A lawyer and a friend, he had also in his wife's financial interest the right to probe the true nature of Hoyt's enterprise. At the early hour she knew he breakfasted she telephoned the hotel, taking the precaution to slip round the corner to a pay station in a druggist's instead of using one of the instruments in the house. As she waited she heard the voice of the Walden night-clerk, drowsily irritable, as always, just before going off duty, and various strident sounds which to her practised ear denoted that the hall-boys were dragging the heavy rocking-chairs to their appointed places in the lobby. Then the door of the hotel telephone booth slammed shut, the receiver rattled, and Estabrook wished her good morning.

"I must see you on business," she said, coming immediately to the point. "I can't explain here; but it's most important and confidential."

"I'll come to your house this morning about ten o'clock," he returned, promptly.

"But I'd rather you wouldn't."

"Oh!"

"And the Walden won't do either. I'm sorry if I'm putting you out; but—"

"That's all right," he reassured. "Suppose we meet at that hour in the Library of Congress —say in the Representatives' reading-room? You'll find it quiet."

She found it more than quiet. The brave chamber set apart for the studious spirits of the lower House mourned with the lifeless hush of an Egyptian tomb. Estabrook, barricaded by heavy books at a far table, was the sole occupant.

"You were coming here anyway?" asked Olive, glancing at his papers as he rose to greet her.

"Yes. I'm looking up something. Come over in this corner. I was right about the peacefulness, you see," he continued, to give her obviously taut nerves a moment to relax. "A few tourists may poke their heads in to see the mosaic mantels; but there will be nobody else. 'Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus,'" he read from a panel devoted to the Muse of history. "What does the average Congressman know or care about those old chaps! They can't teach him how to land a new Federal building for Prairie City, or to wheedle Uncle Sam into forking out good money for a useless dockyard down East. The college professors don't like to think that the average Congressman is the average American, yet—"

"What do you think of Proctor Hoyt?" demanded Olive.

Estabrook accepted the change of topic imperturbably.

"I rather enjoy an imaginative liar," he said, dryly.

"You knew him before I did."

"I met him before you did."

"Don't you take any stock in him whatever?"

"No. My wife says I'm mistaken in my estimate; but her arguments on the other side aren't convincing."

"Does he strike you as a man capable of anything unlawful?"

He eyed her with quickened interest.

"Not on the face of things. But my law experience taught me that the face of things can be mighty deceptive. Such as it is, Mrs. Braisted, my judgment is at your service. And if you want more than opinions," he added, "I stand ready to lend a hand."

"Thank you," she said, warmly. "I'm so glad you said that before I show you that this is your affair, too."

"My affair?"

"I mean through your wife."

He winced as if she had struck him in the face.

"Has that man—"

"She has been induced to put money into a scheme of Hoyt's," Olive whipped in, the red

staining her own cheek in sympathy. "I rather think it's a good deal of money."

"Oh!" he said, intense relief in his tone. "Mrs. Estabrook does as she pleases with her own property. Unless there is a strong reason I wouldn't want to interfere."

"You'll find the reason strong enough," she promised, and plunged into her story.

It was a delicate task, for she had to shield Philippa's unhappy love and exclude Fern altogether; but she omitted no essential detail. It was not a calm recital. As she spoke she lived afresh the miserable anxiety of the past weeks, and, gloss Steve's conduct as she might, she could not hide her fear that he had played with edged tools.

"I thought that perhaps you knew something of this business, too," she ended. "You went about with Hoyt early in the winter."

"Not after I took his measure."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that he threw out hints about his scheme."

"He wanted you to put money in it?"

"No, not money." Estabrook smiled grimly. "He knew my circumstances too well for that. He wanted my influence to kill off a forest reserve measure that might have interfered with his field of operations. You see, I was a member of the committee that had it in charge."

"What happened?"

"I persuaded the committee to report it out." Estabrook squared his jaw. "I'd never thought much of this conservation movement before; but this fellow's sly methods convinced me that there must be some good in it. But the bill was swamped in the rush of business at the end of the session."

Olive suddenly grew white.

"Why, Steve made a speech on conservation," she faltered. "Was—was it when they were considering this bill?"

"Yes."

"And all the time he knew—he was secretly interested— Oh, this is terrible!"

Estabrook smiled reassuringly.

"A few years ago nobody would have thought the worse of him. You must remember, too, that he's new to his job. Don't let the ethics of it worry you. He'll grow. But to get back to Hoyt, that fellow never had any use for my society after he heard that I had secured a berth in the Land Office. Now that I've talked with you I think I see why. His scheme is probably bogus throughout."

"But Steve has maps and figures—"

"Maps and figures prove nothing. A glib promoter could trot out plausible documents for an ice-making plant in Hades. And he'd find gulls to swallow his tale! Hard-headed men that you couldn't humbug on their own ground act like school-boys when the get-rich-quick man

comes along. Shrewdness in one line of business is no guarantee of sound judgment in another, and your husband proves it as hundreds of men have proved it before him. He has believed what he wanted to believe, and I dare say Hoyt has thrown such a fog of words over the weak spots that they've looked like the pick of the argument. It's safe to say it looked straight or Stephen Braisted wouldn't have touched it. It seemed just the gentlemanly throat-cutting we call high finance."

"Then it's not so serious, after all?"

"It is serious enough. If Creevey is Hoyt's accomplice, we're dealing with a gang who don't stick at tampering with the United States mail, and it's quite possible they have the grit for any felony. Then there's the money. I haven't a notion how much our respective partners have dropped in this scheme; but it's a safe prophecy that they'll never recover a cent. That's the cleverest thing about the swindle. The chief victim can't strike back. It isn't the sort of deal that a Representative—particularly a Representative who's been mentioned for higher honors—wants published. Braisted must have seemed specially created for the part he's played. But Hoyt made a false move when he gathered in my wife. I suppose he got greedy and assumed that stylish clothes always mean prosperity. It was a fatal blunder, for it gave away the game. If we can't help the spilled milk, we can at least

keep a sharp watch on what's left in the jug. Unless I'm much mistaken, they'll be after more very shortly."

"More money? What makes you think so?"

"This juggling with the photograph. It has the look of panic, a hasty move to stave off disclosure till the last possible dollar is squeezed out of the swindle. Yes, it's a safe bet that a demand for more sinews of war is on the way."

"Then I think it's high time I warned Steve."

"I wouldn't speak out just yet. As the situation stands, you might simply egg him on to some rash proof of confidence in his own judgment. You see, this isn't a thing he'll want to believe. Give me a little time to think this over and find out all I can. Perhaps something could be done with the manicurist. If she is on bad terms with Hoyt we may be able to use her grievance as a lever to expose him. If it's money she wants, it might be advisable to make her a present. If it isn't money—well, we'll have to meet the feminine contingency on the spot. Do you know her name?"

"No. I don't even know whether she is still working where I saw her that day. I might go there now and have my nails manicured."

"I wouldn't try that yet. You had better concentrate on Creevey. His trail strikes me as more promising. Perhaps we can catch him communicating with Hoyt. When does he go off duty to-night?"

"Soon after dinner."

"Then ask Ben Halsey to follow him if he leaves the house. You'll let me know at once if there are any new developments?"

"You may be sure of that," said Olive. "I don't know what I should do without you. I'm more afraid of those people now that I know they're swindlers. Poor Steve! The truth will be a bitter pill to him."

"Bitter, but wholesome. He'll make a tip-top public servant after this experience. The hard lessons are the ones that teach us most."

"Poor Steve!" she said again.

Then, even as his name passed her lips, Stephen Braisted, for the first time in his Congressional career, entered the reading-room with the intention of putting it to practical use. His face mirrored bewilderment and then embarrassment as he spied them, and his nod to Estabrook was curt. Olive rose and went down the long room to meet him, and, as he turned and stalked silently beside her to the door, she divined that for once in their married life her husband felt the twinge of jealousy. It was a novel and not unpleasant sensation for her, and she could not resist the temptation to prolong it by leaving him the first word. This he was slow to speak, however, and in the same constraint they moved down a corridor celebrating the impracticable deeds of Greek heroes and gained the formal magnificence of the vast central hall. Deeming this setting

adequate for voicing his towering injury, Braisted wheeled.

"Find Estabrook entertaining this morning?" he inquired, with killing suavity.

"Very."

He abruptly gave way to anger.

"You were talking about me in there," he accused.

Olive no longer found the scene diverting. How much did he know?

"What of it?" she said.

"You don't deny it?"

"No."

"I distinctly heard my name mentioned as I entered the door. Then, when you saw who it was, you turned all colors."

"You startled me, Steve."

"I don't need telling! Now I don't criticize your gossiping with another woman's husband—"

"No," she interposed, quietly, "I wouldn't if I were you. It's the fashion in Washington."

"Don't try to put me off. I want to know what Estabrook said about me."

She saw her way at last and laughed.

"He said that, after your experience here, you will make a tiptop public servant."

"Did he say that? He was sheepishly taken aback and pleased at the tribute. "His opinion is worth having." To change the subject, he added that he had dropped into the library with the idea of priming himself with a few facts

about the tariff. "I didn't want to ask Ben's help," he went on. "He looked off color when I saw him after breakfast, and I told him to take things easy."

"I'm glad you did, Steve. I thought yesterday he seemed peaked. I'll mother him a little, poor boy, when I get home. He mustn't go out in this heat. He feels it so."

Braisted hemmed uneasily.

"I sent him out this morning," he owned.

"I wish you hadn't."

"There was some banking business which had to be looked after. I told him he needn't do another tap to-day. Rest will set him up. Of course, I have worked him hard lately; but I've paid him well. Let's try the House restaurant, Ollie. We've often talked of lunching up here, you know, and this is a good chance."

The once coveted invitation came too late. There was no longer any glamour attached to such an outing; but she did not think of this as she declined to stay. She was wondering what errand among the banks had been important enough to make Steve disregard his secretary's ailing face. Had Estabrook's prediction already come true?

Halsey had not yet come in when she reached home, and it was long after luncheon when, stationed anxiously in a window, she saw him dismount from a cab. He was carrying a black bag which, small as it was, seemed to tax his

strength, and his whole bearing betrayed exhaustion. Olive flew to meet him in the hall.

"You should never have left the house," she cried. "Steve was stark mad to let you go."

Ben mustered the ghost of a smile.

"Ah, this is cool," he said, passing a hand across his forehead. "You have to be Southern born to hold your own against the first hot days here." He swayed unsteadily, and Olive, slipping her arm around his shoulders, guided him to the nearest of the stone benches. "That's better, thanks," he acknowledged, with closed eyes. "I felt the same way down-town."

She put out her hand to take the black bag, which he still clutched; but at her touch his eyes flew open instantly and she desisted.

"It's money," he whispered, when the uselessly hovering footman had been despatched for water. "Thousands! It must go in the—the library safe. You—you'll help?"

"Yes," she soothed, "I'll help. Be quiet till you feel stronger."

He struggled against his weakness, and after fumbling in his pockets extended a card.

"The combination," he explained, painfully. "You—you'll have to help. It looks like a cabinet—the safe. I must ask—ask you—"

And then, with his petition half uttered, he fainted.

Later, as she sat beside his bed waiting for the doctor, Halsey roused momentarily from the

lethargy which followed his swoon, and cast a fevered glance around the room. Olive caught up the black bag and showed it to him, empty.

"It's safe, Ben," she said. "Don't worry."

He tried to nod his thanks.

"Thousands!" he whispered.

She could well believe it. The bosom of her gown sagged with the weight of the crisp notes, which, even in her hasty handling, she had perceived were chiefly of large denominations. But she did not dwell on this burden and its responsibilities. Her one thought was to soothe the sick lad, over whom her maternal heart yearned as it would for her own boy in like distress. She only left him when the physician took her place, and then went no farther than the corridor. Here the doctor found her waiting when he came at last from the sick-room.

"What is it?" she demanded.

He answered with generalities and directions.

"This medicine is for the temperature," he added; "but if he can sleep without it don't bother him. I'll drop in again toward evening. No sign of rain, do you think? The lawns are beginning to look parched."

"But Ben?" she persisted. "It isn't serious?"

"I can tell better by and by," he replied, guardedly. "I sha'n't be later than six o'clock."

She resumed her watch by the bedside, and the afternoon dragged on. Toward five o'clock she heard her husband's step, and went hurriedly

out to him. Braisted listened to the news with contrition, and tiptoeing into the room stood looking gravely down at his secretary's hot face. Ben was battling with dread phantasms of the dream world, and as Olive shifted the pillow and smoothed back the tumbled hair from his damp forehead, his lips moved laboriously.

"Thank you—Fern," he said. "I—I knew you would come back."

"Flighty!" whispered Braisted; but he avoided his wife's glance.

Then Halsey's eyes opened wide upon his employer with the probing stare of the sick.

"Money," he muttered. "Safe."

"That's all right, old man," Steve answered. "I understand."

CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN the doctor came a second time from Halsey's room they awaited him together; but, as before, he withheld his complete diagnosis.

"To-morrow may tell another story," he said.

"I've worked him hard," Braisted admitted. "I see now that I piled it on with too stiff a hand. God knows I'm sorry."

"The work alone hasn't used him up."

"Do you mean that he worried himself sick?" asked Olive.

"I mean improper nutrition. I questioned Halsey about his habits and learned the usual thing. When he ate at all he ate rubbish—mere rubbish. The fare at some of the cheap boarding-houses in this city would stagger the digestive organs of a shark. Yet these ambitious young fellows imagine that they are saving money!"

"But Halsey didn't need to scrimp," protested Braisted. "I paid him well and thought he lived well."

"He explained that his salary was generous."

Ben's boarding-house thrust its depressing memory before Olive.

"Oh, why didn't I make him leave that place

at once?" she cried. "But I saw it only a few days ago, and he told me the table was plentiful."

The physician wagged the didactic finger of a man with a hobby.

"What is mere plenty?" he scoffed. "I tell you there should be a public censor of diet."

Steve went down-stairs with the doctor, but soon returned with an air of superhuman calm that roused her suspicion before he opened his lips.

"He's sending a nurse, Olive. He thinks it's best, and so do I."

"A trained nurse!"

"I can't have you wearing yourself out."

She dismissed this plea summarily.

"The doctor told you more than he would say to me," she declared. "Now, what is it?"

"He might have known you'd worm it out of me," complained her husband. "He wanted me to keep mum to-night because you look fagged out now. The fact is, he found some symptoms of typhoid. Not all, mind you," he reassured, as her face blanched. "He was careful to say that. He'll know the truth after he has finished one or two tests. I can't see what the boy was thinking of to live in a cheap hashery of that kind," he grumbled, venting his worry in faultfinding. "He has himself to thank for his fix."

"It wasn't for himself," Olive blurted out, tearfully. "He was saving for Fern."

"For Fern! Why, he must have seen—"

"He wouldn't believe what he saw."

Braisted studied the floor.

"He has been talking to you, I suppose?"

"Yes. It seemed a waste of breath to tell you before, Steve; but now I'll say what I think. I would rather my girl married Ben Halsey than any man on earth, and I pray God may open both your eyes and hers to his real worth. If he dies, it will come home to you."

Having imposed a proper share of her unrest on her husband's shoulders, she went to watch over Ben till the nurse relieved her of her charge and turned her thoughts toward the other anxiety, which, tangible and insistent, pressed its burden to her breast. Beyond doubt this money was intended for Hoyt. If she put it in the library safe it might find its way into his hands this very night. Yet, if she withheld it and Steve missed it, what remained to her save a premature and perhaps fatal exposure of her hand?

In this dilemma, Steve let fall a saving piece of information. Entering the library, she found him kneeling before the Louis Quinze cabinet, which she now knew concealed beneath its paint and gilding a frame of obstinate steel.

"I'm in a bit of a hole," he said, looking up. "Perhaps you don't know it, but this bow-legged gimcrack is a safe. See!" He swung open the light outer door and disclosed the solid inner barrier. "It was just like Larry

Colburn to have a toy of this kind. Ben put me on to it this morning. He had seen something of the sort in New York where this was made, and suggested that we use it for a little cash I was drawing out to close a deal."

"How can you think of business now?"

"Because I've got to think about it. Don't set me down as hard-hearted till you know the facts. Maybe you heard Halsey trying to tell me that the money was in this safe?"

"Yes," she replied, huskily.

"Well, the awkward thing is that he's the only one who knows the combination. He found it on a card inside—the thing wasn't locked when he first examined it—but I didn't bother to take a memorandum. How was I to guess that he was coming down sick? I've gone through the suit he wore to-day, but I couldn't find a pen-scratch that would help. If I'd only questioned him up there when his mind was on it!"

"You won't try to get it out of him?" she faltered.

"What do you take me for?" he retorted. "Even if I were such a fool, do you suppose the nurse would let me pester him?" He stared absently at the safe for a moment; then, with an ejaculation of relief, rose abruptly and crossed the room to an electric call.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"Creevey, of course. I don't see why I didn't think of him sooner. Wouldn't he, always pok-

ing about among the furniture, have discovered long ago what this is? Ten chances to one he knows the combination."

"Oh, be careful, Steve," she implored, desperately. "Don't—don't let a servant know you've that money in the house."

"Trust me!"

The butler answered the summons in person.

"You know that this cabinet is a safe?" said Braisted.

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir."

"I want to examine it, but it's locked."

"Is it, sir?" Creevey's expression told nothing.

"I thought you might possibly remember the combination."

"I never knew it, sir."

"Why, I had an idea you might have stored some of the silver there in the Colburns' time."

"No, sir. The plate was all kept in the vault off the butler's pantry."

"That's all. If you don't know it, you don't."

"Sorry, sir."

"The business will simply have to wait till the doctor speaks out," said Braisted, as Creevey withdrew. "If Halsey is really in for something serious, I can wire the manufacturers to send down an expert. Probably we'll know where we stand in the morning."

She was giddy with relief. She was sure of a night's delay, and even if Steve sent for an ex-

pert on the morrow many more hours, perhaps a day or two, might elapse before the safe gave up its secret. Meanwhile, she must somehow compass their deliverance. Surely Estabrook, with his clear brain, would find a loophole.

As her thoughts reverted to the lawyer, she recalled his advice that Ben Halsey should follow the butler if he left the house that night. And Ben, with exhausted body and wandering wits, lay above stairs in the custody of a nurse! Necessity pointed to a single course, and when, on the stroke of nine, Creevey let himself out of the servants' door and sauntered round into the dusky avenue, Olive, with swift-beating heart, glided at a discreet distance in his wake.

They had thus covered scarcely half the block when he startled her by darting into a thick clump of shrubbery at the edge of a lawn lying open to the sidewalk, and then, even as she made hasty choice of a post to watch and wait, a street-light revealed Hoyt making his way across the pavement. He came on by the butler's hiding-place unsuspiciously, and an instant later passed her own. Then the great door clanged and Creevey tranquilly resumed his stroll.

With that beginning, Olive was alert for adventures; but thereafter her errand wore the aspect of a wild-goose chase. Creevey had seemingly no fixed objective. Wrapped in meditative enjoyment of the cooling breeze which

had attended nightfall, he strolled from street to park and from park to avenue without heed of time or needless steps. Once, as they bisected one of the city's familiar circles, he paused and bent his reverend head above a flowering shrub which scattered abroad an exotic fragrance; and again, as they followed a bright-lit thoroughfare to the lower city, he stopped for a leisured interval in a tobacconist's, which he quitted at last puffing a cigarette of an odor as bizarre and musky as the shrub.

Thence the chase led through business streets, past hotels, saloons, and gay shop-windows, all garish with electricity, and many of them interesting to the loitering Creevey; but halting when he halted, and avoiding the blaze of light where she could, Olive, from the farther curb, kept him ever in view, and in the weary end, convinced that she had performed a fool's errand, had her dubious reward. They had come into a region of department-stores and office-buildings, when Creevey tossed his second cigarette into the gutter and turned into a narrow hallway lit by a single feeble gas-jet. Olive crossed the street, and, listening in the doorway, heard him mount flight after flight of stairs, till gaining, as it seemed, the topmost floor, he paused and gave a measured knock. Then a door opened and closed, and the hall was still. A directory level with her eyes told her that this was an office building, and, as her glance took in the tarnished

lettering, it told her something else which apparently stamped the whole affair with futility. Returning to the opposite sidewalk, she scanned the top story, and the light which shone only from three certain windows corroborated the signboard's testimony that the pursuit of Creevey had ended, of all absurd places, in the beauty-parlor of Madam Sheba!

Stationing herself in another hallway, she lingered, in the hope that this call might be a passing episode, rather than the tame anti-climax of her quest. The nephew and successor of the late Madam Sheba could have naught to do with her problem. Charlatans both, he and Creevey were probably friends bound by a common aim to gull the simple. Yet, if he had an errand, the butler would seem to have accomplished it when, after some twenty or more minutes, he descended, and with the same air of infinite leisure sauntered to the nearest street corner, hailed a Chevy Chase car, and was borne rapidly away.

Olive took the next car herself, and in profound digust rode to the Walden. The measure in which Estabrook had put his trust had revealed nothing save Creevey's desire to avoid Hoyt; but she felt an imperative need to see the lawyer without delay. As she crossed the white circle cast by the arc light at the street corner the high-pitched voice of a colored girl wished her good evening, and she recognized the maid

Milly, in festal purple, also bound toward the hotel.

"I wa'n't shore at first," she laughed, showing all her white teeth. "You suttinly do look diff'rent, Mis' Braisted."

"These aren't new clothes," said Olive, kindly. "You've helped me into this black dress many a time."

"Yas'm. An' las' time it wouldn't hook nohow. That's what I mean. You must have lost a lot of flesh. Even befo' you left the Walden I see it a-goin'."

This expert opinion did not elate Olive as it would have done some months ago. She would rather have gone churn-shaped forever than undergo the worry that had destroyed her appetite and peace of mind.

"This weather would make an elephant thin," she sighed.

" 'Deed it would," agreed Milly. "It beats Madam Sheba what I tol' you of las' winter. I heard a funny thing about that place to-day."

"About Madam Sheba's?"

"Yas'm. Do you 'member the Mis' Finch I tol' you tried the 'nastics an' got thin?"

"Yes."

"An' the Baltimo' girl who puttended she used to be fat an' wrinkled?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, Mis' Finch come back yesterday fo' a spell, an' when I sayd she was lookin' stout

again she reckoned she'd better mosey down to the beauty-parlor straightaway. When she come back she asked me what I think? I sayd I dunno, an' she tol' me how another handsome young woman met her an', word fo' word, started to reel off the first girl's lingo about losin' her wrinkles an' bein' a sight older than she looked. Mis' Finch sayd she jes' bust out laffin in her face. Then the woman, she laffed, too, an' 'splained how she wa'n't there reg'lar, but was on'y tryin' her hand fo' fun while the other girl took a few days off."

The maid's gossip charged Creevey's visit with significance, and Olive delayed to put one or two careless questions about the new-comer at Madam Sheba's; but Milly could recall no detail save bleached hair. This sufficed to heart-en her, however. Perhaps her quest had not been fruitless, after all.

She was spared the necessity of asking for Estabrook. As she entered the lobby she saw him watching a game of bridge. His glance told her he understood that she was in search of him; but Mrs. Tully spied her at the same instant, and, thrusting her cards into Esta-brook's hands, hastened across the room.

"My dear," she protested, "why did you bother? I should have come to you in the morning to say good-by. I am so sorry about poor young Halsey. When you didn't turn up for luncheon I suspected sickness and finally

'phoned. They couldn't find you—it was about an hour ago—but your husband talked with me."

"The luncheon popped right out of my mind," confessed Olive, who in strict truth had not thought of it since the far-away past of yesterday. "If I had done such a thing to Mrs. Pratt I should shake in my boots. She would take it as an insult to the House of Representatives."

"Poor Harriet! She left to-day in tears, and she'll count the days till December brings her back. I understand the feeling. My throat will be lumpy, too, when I go to-morrow. We care for our homes, of course; but Washington stands for something in most of our lives that the homes can't supply. For Harriet, as I happen to know, it means a touch of gay color in an existence otherwise drab. You would care for Washington yourself if you needed it."

"Oh, as for needing it, nobody could have come here greener than I was. You know that best of all."

"You've twisted my meaning. I'm talking of the women with starved lives."

"Well, anyhow, I've grown to like Washington," said Olive, voicing a truth she had been slow to realize. "It has come about in spite of me, but I do. Another winter, I'm going to try your recipe and hunt for the funny side of things."

The old lady nodded brightly.

"I hope I shall be here to help," she replied. "If I'm not—well, I dare say I'll find it elsewhere."

As Olive said good night to the group at the whist-table Estabrook surrendered his cards and asked if he might put her in her carriage.

"It's a street-car," she announced, for those who listened; "but I'll be glad of help. The conductors hurry me so." As they passed out she added: "We'd better take a cab when we get round the corner. I must put a lot of money in your hands."

He gave her a look of frank admiration.

"You don't mean to say you've bagged the sinews of war?"

"I think so."

"What a woman you are!"

CHAPTER XXVII

HE exclaimed again when in the dusk of the cab she displayed the money and told him the day's happenings.

"I'm glad your husband does business on a cash basis," he commented, thoughtfully. "Hoyt probably doesn't hold a line of his writing that could be used as a club in the future. And speaking of the future, I think that, no matter how this affair turns out, you had better say nothing of my part in it. If he knows that I know, it will always stand as an awkward bar between us. I don't intend to mention it to my wife. The loss of her money will be lesson enough."

"I sha'n't harp on it, goodness knows," said Olive. "It will be enough for me to sleep nights as I used before I laid eyes on this thieving crew. But I don't see sleep ahead of me yet. After all, things haven't greatly altered since I saw you this afternoon."

"Haven't they, though!" He lifted one of the bundles of bank-notes with a chuckle. "When you picked up this hand you drew trumps."

"We can't conceal the fact that we have it very long."

"The main point is that you have it. Another point is that now I know Hoyt's operations are crooked."

"You've found out things, too?"

"Yes. This morning I said the scheme looked bogus. To-night I'm sure of it. You see, I did a little discreet investigating when I got back to the Land Office. Mrs. Braisted, Hoyt has never controlled an acre of that timber land."

"Then Steve—"

"He has paid something for nothing—paid it as trustingly as a child. If Hoyt showed him scrip, it was faked. I've never come across a more barefaced swindle. Yet, in a way, it's a comforting discovery."

"I don't see how."

"I mean that there is no question of defrauding the Government, for Uncle Sam has never given this particular tract away."

Olive shook her head wearily.

"I can't pretend I understand it," she said; "but I'm glad to hear of anything that makes this business look any less black. What must we do next?"

"Hold on to that money and watch the rascals squirm. I believe they're already at loggerheads—Hoyt on one side, Creevey and that woman on the other. If Creevey had known that Hoyt expected to pocket this bank-roll to-night he'd never have left the house. If he had had the faintest suspicion, he would have turned

back when he saw him. Yet he, on his part, is carrying on some intrigue. His dodging Hoyt shows that. Last of all, to give the situation its final corkscrew twist, is it credible that your butler doesn't know the combination of the library safe? Hasn't he every other detail of the house at his finger-ends? If we assume he is a spy, we can't escape that inference."

"If he knows it, why not Hoyt?"

"Probably he does know it; but he wouldn't be fool enough to let your husband suspect the fact. Moreover, he won't drop a whisper about his disappointment to-night to Creevey, if he is trying to do him out of his share of the spoils."

"But what if he isn't trying to cheat him? What if he does tell him that Steve had the money put in the safe?"

"In order to get him to find out if it's really there?"

"Yes. What will Hoyt think if he reports that the safe is empty?"

"He'll think he's a liar, and Creevey will return the compliment."

"And where does that lead us?"

"To the blonde in the beauty-parlor. About that stage I think that if properly handled she'll tell what she knows. If Creevey gets the notion that he has been tricked, this manicure woman may even talk without coaxing."

Olive rode a moment in silence.

"If it comes to a pinch," she declared, "I'll go and see her."

"Good!" said Estabrook. "She would say more to you than to anybody else. And now, before I hop out, I want to give you back this imposing consignment of legal-tender."

"Give it back! Why?"

"Because you may want to lay hands on it at short notice. As I said at the outset to-night, it will be far better if I keep in the background. And another thing: I am a man and can make a fair guess at another man's feelings, and I know that Braisted will think better of himself afterward if he's given a chance to help now. It may not be possible to do it, but if you can, wind up this business shoulder to shoulder."

The servant who let her in told her smilingly that a gentleman was waiting in the drawing-room.

"Who is it?" she queried.

"He asked me not to mention his name. He wants to take you by surprise."

Olive felt in no mood for surprises, and went listlessly to meet the unknown, whom she supposed some neighbor from Tuscarora. As she neared the drawing-room Eli Yale trotted out, and in dog language gave her such an ardent welcome that she stooped to him with a lesser wave of the gratitude of the sad night when they first plighted friendship.

"Gee whiz!" said a voice from the doorway. "I knew you'd appreciate him in time; but I didn't expect this!"

"S. J.! What are you doing here?"

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

His mother swept him into an embrace which set that question at rest. From the canine point of view it seemed a grapple of hostile powers requiring an offensive alliance with one or the other belligerent. It would have been a moment of painful indecision for a weak character; but Eli was no paltering casuist, and his choice of sides was instant. Aligning himself with Olive, he turned on his former master the Harvard-defying grimace that S. J. himself had taught him, and by way of emphasis threw in a truculent snarl peculiarly his own.

"You ungrateful cuss!" laughed S. J. "I disown you."

The war cloud dissipated, Eli yawned indifferently, trailed after them into the drawing-room, and, settling himself at Olive's feet, cocked a suspicious eye when she laid her hand on S. J.'s shoulder and bade him be open and above board with his mother.

"You sent word that you wouldn't be home till the third week in June," she added. "Now what has happened?"

The collegian wriggled.

"You're every bit as bad as father," he protested. "He thought I'd been expelled."

"I know better than that. I know, too, that you're not sick, like poor Ben up-stairs."

"I'm mighty sorry for Halsey," said S. J., welcoming the digression. "I went right up as soon as I heard. The nurse told me he was sleeping comfortably. I hope you are feeling fit, mother. You look thin."

"So I'm told—even by Steve. But never mind me. We were talking about your coming home so early."

"I was through with my exams. Passed 'em, too."

"But the boat-race isn't over. You expected to stay for that. Your head was full of it."

"Oh, bother it all, mother," he blurted out, coloring, "I came straight home to be with you. That's the reason. I—I got the idea that, with Fern away and father busy, you were lonesome and—and worried."

Olive was touched and puzzled.

"What gave you that notion?" she asked, gently.

Her son squirmed afresh.

"What a cross-examiner you are! It was Miss Blount put it in my head, if you must know."

"When did she talk to you?"

"The day I ran down to New York last week. She's a queer girl. She's not as old as I am, but she talked to me like a grandmother, and what she said was sense. I saw, as I didn't at Easter, that—well, that you weren't having a

square deal and—and so I made up my mind to cut the race."

"You're a good boy."

"I'm a pinhead," he said, with humility. "I ought to have seen things without a girl to poke me up. Now what's worrying you, mother?"

"What should worry me, dearie?" she laughed.

Her lightness seemed forced to his awakened solicitude.

"I know you're fond of old Ben," he persisted; "but you can't have got thin in a day on his account. Why don't you tell a fellow?"

Olive longed to pour out the whole story, but loyalty to Steve stopped her lips. She could freely confide in Estabrook, because he judged with the leniency impossible to kinship and youth. S. J. would see with the eyes of a son, and Steve's folly would ever stand between him and complete respect. She might pardonably have recalled that the man had seldom spared her in their children's eyes; but she had never borne a grudge in her life, and the petty thought did not cross her mind now as she parried S. J.'s questions.

"Oh, well," he said, "if you won't, why, you won't. I didn't know but you had father and that Hoyt man on your mind."

"Why?"

"They're so confoundedly mysterious. They are powwowing in the library now. It was bad enough at Easter, but to-night father can't even

spare time to be civil. I'd no sooner shaken hands and convinced him that I hadn't been fired than he put me out of the room. Are you still in the dark, too?"

"No. I know what it's all about."

"Is it so tremendous?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if it came to nothing in the end," she said.

"Shouldn't you? What a sell! Here comes father now."

Steve put his hand on his son's shoulder.

"I'm mighty glad to see you, my boy," he said.

"You didn't seem glad when I went into the library," responded that young gentleman, coldly.

"Business is business," said Braisted, sententiously. "You'll be learning that when this college picnic is over. Been out, Olive?"

"Yes, to the Walden. I owed Mrs. Tully an apology for forgetting her luncheon. She told me that you explained things over the 'phone. Has Mr. Hoyt gone?"

"No. I left him in the library writing a letter —something he'd forgotten."

As father and son fell into conversation together, she slipped out of the room unnoted save by Eli Yale, who followed, his claws rattling noisily wherever he trod the hard floor. Once outside the drawing-room, she tried to send the dog back; but he genially declined to forsake her, and she therefore seized him by

the collar and guided him quietly from rug to rug till they reached the library threshold. She believed that Hoyt's letter-writing was a mere ruse, and her first glance past the half-open door justified her suspicion. He was at neither the reading-table nor the desk.

The Braisteds' predecessors had made use of many screens about the place, which, like most large houses, was subject to wandering draughts, and one of these safeguards, an affair of stamped and gilded leather, still occupied its winter station just within the library door. Behind this Olive slipped, and through the narrow slit between its hinges reconnoitered the room. Hoyt knelt where she expected to find him, and both the inner and outer doors of the cabinet safe were wide open. Then, before she could even question whether she would confront him, Eli Yale, who had entered muzzle to the floor, broke from her now lax custody and pounced upon the enemy.

There was a brief and, at first, silent struggle. Hoyt went down on his hands under the impact; but, scrambling to his feet, contrived, at the cost of a ruined coat, to hurl the dog from him and seize a chair, which he wielded alternately as bludgeon and shield while he kicked at the yawning doors of the safe. But Eli, enraged by his failure to close with his foe, began of a sudden to vary his frantic lunges with insults of such deep-throated vigor as put a

quiet settlement out of the question. Collecting her wits, Olive darted back into the hall, and when the others, alarmed by the fracas, came trooping from the drawing-room, she met them as if she knew no more of the affair than they and passed into the library in their company. By now Hoyt had managed to shift the line of battle some half-dozen paces from the cabinet.

"The dog's mad," he called, fending off the animal's rushes.

"Mad your grandmother!" retorted S. J., indignantly. "He's had provocation of some kind."

Braisted shouldered to the front with a poker.

"Out of the way, S. J.," he ordered. "I'll fix the vicious brute."

Olive stayed his hand in time, caught Eli by the collar, and, amid a rain of warnings, queries, and apologies from Steve, easily reduced the dog to his usual docile self and turned him over to her grinning son.

"Shut him up somewhere till Mr. Hoyt leaves the house," she directed; and then, for his ear only, added: "Go to bed, son. I must have a talk with your father."

Yielding Eli a wide path in his triumphant retreat, Hoyt began to edge casually toward the safe, which still stood ajar. He was yet short of the goal, however, when Olive, affecting none of his carelessness, forestalled him by taking her stand before the cabinet with a look in which

she deliberately meant him to read his checkmate. End as the situation might, she was bound that he should not nullify the evidence of that open door.

Braisted, heeding nothing of this, still labored at his apologies.

"I'll see that the beast gets his medicine, Hoyt," he promised. "I don't propose to give a public nuisance the run of my premises. Are you sure his teeth didn't go deeper than the cloth?"

"Quite. Say no more about it, my friend."

"I sha'n't let the matter drop till I've squared the damages. Mind you send me the tailor's bill for a new suit."

Hoyt shrugged as if the discussion bored him, and with a formal bow to Olive moved toward the door.

"Oh, don't go yet," Steve objected. "Have a drink first. My mouth is watering for one of Creevey's mint-juleps. He has learned to do the trick almost as well as a native."

The refusal which obviously hung upon Hoyt's lips checked itself at the butler's name.

"Hasn't Creevey gone to bed?" he asked. "It's after midnight."

Braisted prodded the electric button.

"We'll soon know. I give the chap his evenings; but they tell me he never stays out long. He'd rather spend his time reading up antiques."

But the second butler disclosed that his su-

perior had for once relaxed his studious habit. It was his drowsy impression that Creevey had gone to a roof-garden, but of this he was not at all sure. In any case, Creevey had not yet returned. As this fact clearly established itself, Hoyt pushed into the hall and abruptly took himself off.

Braisted re-entered the library with a puzzled face.

"I don't know what to think of Hoyt," he said. "Didn't I do everything I could to make up for that infernal dog?"

"Too much."

"Oh, I don't know about that; but, anyhow, the fellow flew off in a huff. He never stopped even to say good night."

"If you had stood near this window you might have heard him run."

"Run!"

"Like the thief he is."

"That's strong language to apply to a friend of mine."

"Is it?" She stepped aside and let the cabinet—unlocked, gaping, empty—tell its story. "Judge for yourself, Steve."

CHAPTER XXVIII

CRUSHED by the mute evidence of the safe, it was a simple task to show him his folly. But Olive was at once too generous and too impatient to prolong her triumph, and no sooner saw him convinced than she completed her confession, and, between tears and laughter, heaped his lap with the lost money.

"You beat him, Ollie! You! You!" For a time he could only repeat this wondering cry. Then the mere feel of the crisp notes seemed to work a physical reaction in the man. He remembered that the world outside knew nothing of his humiliation. He took heart, and even began to exult. "We've got him!" he said. "He's dropped his big stake. He's lost his grip on me altogether. When he nosed into that safe the game went out of his hands. He daren't blackmail me after a job like that. By heaven, I'd shell out another thousand or two to see his face when he hears that old Creevey hasn't the goods either. They may be jawing it out together right now."

"Mightn't Creevey be the brains of it all?"

"It's possible. But Hoyt is no fool, let me

tell you. It was his inside knowledge of Marshall Blount that took me in. How was I to guess where he'd got his information? Perhaps Creevey used to be in asphalt, too. Then there's that manicure woman! I wish I knew the whole truth about this gang."

"I don't. I hope we never lay eyes on any of them."

A startling idea lit Braisted's face.

"I'm not dead sure that we're done with them!" he exclaimed. "What if Creevey did go to a roof-garden after you lost sight of him?"

"Steve! You don't think he'll come back?"

"I certainly wish he would. Don't you worry that there would be a row. I'd be tempted to kick Hoyt down-stairs; but Creevey would be safe. I can't help respecting a swindler as smooth as he is. I'd peel a bill of three figures off this roll if he would answer my questions. It would be a good investment."

Olive shuddered at that word of ill-omen.

"I've had investments enough for one lifetime," she retorted, "and as for calmly discussing his rascality with Creevey himself, why, put the idea right out of your head. If there is a bolt on the servants' door, I'll slip it; if there isn't, I'll drive a nail."

Braisted submitted humbly.

"Have it your own way, Ollie," he said. "God knows you have earned the right. It will take me the rest of my days to thank you.

You're the real success of this family. I'm only an accident."

As they left the library at last they confronted Halsey's trained nurse.

"He's not worse?" demanded Olive, taking instant alarm.

"No, better; much better," said the woman. "I think one of your servants is locked out. At least, some one has been signaling at the back for several minutes. No one answered my ring, so I started down to investigate."

"I'll attend to it," said Braisted, promptly.

Husband and wife stared into each other's eyes as the nurse retraced her noiseless way to the sick-room.

"He's come!"

"Remember your promise, Steve."

"It seems a cowardly trick to skulk here."

"It is common sense. The man is a criminal. He probably goes armed."

"Did you stop to think of that when you followed him?"

"That was different. He wouldn't have attacked a woman."

"There is no question of a row, I tell you, and even if there were, I'm carrying a revolver. I slipped it in my pocket when I found the money would have to lie in the house to-night. It's only human nature that I should be keen to get to the bottom of this bunco-game. I wouldn't feel half so sore."

Estabrook's forgotten words recurred to her. "Wind up this business shoulder to shoulder." Had she permitted Steve the share which was to salve his pride and make for future happiness?

"Talk to him if your heart is set on it," she yielded, "but let me stand by."

"This is something like it," he said, and led the way.

As they passed an open window in descending, they heard the signal, a low whistle of three descending notes, which Steve imitated as he set the door ajar and waited in the thick obscurity of the entry.

"I thought—I thought—" came a broken, reproachful whisper; and then a shape which, even in that gloom, could not be mistaken for the butler, slipped through the opening, and with a most unmasculine sigh of relief glided into Braisted's astonished arms.

"Suffering cats!" he ejaculated, and set his back against the door. "The light, Ollie! The light!"

Flooding the entry, the pitiless electricity revealed the manicurist huddled against the farther wall.

"What do you want of me?" she gasped, her dazzled eyes shifting desperately from one to the other; then, taking courage from their own bewilderment, "You—you frightened me."

Braisted seized the mastery of the situation.

"We want you to tell the truth," he said, sternly.

"I don't understand—"

"Oh yes, you do. Quit shamming. It's no use. The jig is up!"

She flashed him a wary look, folded her arms, and, with a defiant uplift of her blond head, left the word to him.

"Want particulars, do you?" he went on. "Well, I'll hand you a few. For a starter, I know that you're a pack of swindlers—Hoyt, my fancy butler, and you, Miss God-knows-what! Fact number two: you haven't been content to skin me; you've tried to do one another. You made a blunder there, my lady. If you three had stuck together you might have stood some chance. Did you actually expect to find Creevey here after that crook Hoyt piled into the beauty-parlor and told you that the safe was empty?"

His bold shot told. Weakened by his sweeping knowledge, she read into his final question bitter warrant for the doubt which must have tortured her as she came seeking Creevey in the dead of night. Pallid and unstrung, she leaned against the wall, her dry lips moving without a sound.

Olive felt only pity for this silent misery.

"Let her go, Steve," she entreated.

Heartened by this intercession, the woman found her voice.

"What do you want of me?" she asked, repeating her first cry. "You can't touch me for anything."

"I want you to clear up one or two points," Braisted answered.

"You'll get no evidence out of me. They served me jolly rotten—both of them—but I'll not peach."

"Who mentioned evidence? I've been done to a turn; but I don't propose to play the baby act. All I'm keen about is a few of the missing links, and I would make it worth your while to supply them. I take it you won't care to linger as understudy at the beauty-parlor? Well, pick your destination and I'll ante the car fare, and perhaps a little pin-money on the side."

For a long interval she stood sullenly busy with her thoughts.

"I'd like to get back to England," she said, at last.

"England it is, then. Is that where you hail from?"

"Yes. I am English."

"What is your real name?"

"I sha'n't tell."

Braisted was surprised to see her flush.

"Come now," he urged, "you want to earn your passage-money, don't you?"

"My name is my own business."

"Perhaps you'd rather I put the worst construction on this midnight visit to my butler?"

"Don't, Steve," protested Olive.

The woman turned her head.

"Everybody said your heart was in the right

place," she owned. "The truth is, Creevey is my father. He—he oughtn't to be a servant. He might have been anything if he'd been born anywhere but England."

"I guess that's right," said Braisted, taken aback by her confession. "It's a pity he couldn't stay honest."

"He was honest till"—her voice broke—"till I begged him to help Hoyt."

"Till you begged him?"

"Yes. I got him into this scrape."

"What is Hoyt to you?"

"Nothing!" she cried, vehemently. "I'm done with him."

"He must have been something to you not long ago if you coaxed your father to turn crooked on his account."

She had no answer for this; but her eyes welled with tears, and Braisted hastily took another tack.

"I don't want to run your love affair through a cross-examination," he disclaimed; "but I must have the essential facts. Have you known all along that Hoyt was a swindler?"

"Of course not. Do you suppose I would have asked my father to help him if I'd known his real game?"

"I've only your word for it."

"It's the truth. I swear it's the truth. Hoyt said that he had a big deal on, and that he would feel more comfortable if there was somebody

here in the house to keep track of you, to tell him the people you went with and all that."

"I see." Braisted smiled bitterly. "He was afraid some other grafter might get a chance at the good thing. Go ahead."

"Well, that's how my father was drawn into it. He came here to please me. I—I expected to be married when the business was finished. I don't see how I was ever such a fool as to believe in Hoyt. Most of the time he was making up to your daughter I believed in him; but last week I got jealous."

"And followed him to New York?"

"Yes; and even then he pulled the wool over my eyes. I thought it was just to help along the deal."

"I'm sure it was," put in Olive.

"I'm not. He had run off with one rich girl, remember. I never suspected that other marriage till Sunday."

Another section of Olive's dissected puzzle fitted into place.

"You guessed it when Creevey told you about Miss Blount's letter?" she asked.

"Yes. He didn't trust Hoyt as I did, and tried to find out all he could. And that's why your photograph was late."

"And broken?"

"And broken. I stamped on it, I was so furious. I wanted to come to you right away and expose him. I did mean to come to you

to-morrow. I wouldn't stand by and let any decent girl marry that blackguard."

"You would have come on Fern's account?" exclaimed Olive.

"Sounds fishy, doesn't it? I'm telling you the straight truth, all the same. I'm not a bad woman, an adventuress. I'm just a fool."

They were dumb before this proof of human nature's fantastic variety. With a word she had reversed their positions and made them feel her debtors.

The woman herself broke the pause.

"Have you heard enough?" she asked, wearily.

"Yes." His look questioning Olive's, Braisted drew forth one of the bundles of rescued bank-notes, made a lavish choice, and offered the money to the figure opposite, suddenly grown rigid and still. "This is yours," he said.

She stared from the package in his hand to the sagging pockets of his coat.

"He didn't take it!" she cried. "You have the money there?"

"Of course Creevey didn't take it. He never had the chance."

The color flamed back into her face.

"You made me believe my father a thief!"

"I let you infer what you pleased. You'd have told me nothing otherwise."

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"They say he went to a roof-garden. I guess you'll run across him before long. Take your

money. You have done us a good turn, and we're glad to give it. My wife will bear me out in this."

Olive never had the opportunity. The next instant the door was flung wide, and Steve, his rejected gift still outstretched, found himself peering into the enigmatic night.

On the morrow, bearing himself with the outward awkwardness that to his wife's eyes denoted inward grace, Braisted confessed that he had wired Fern.

"I thought she ought to know about Halsey," he explained.

Olive's heart skipped a beat.

"I hope you didn't frighten the child. We know that there is no danger now."

"I didn't scare her enough to hurt her. Here's her reply. She's coming at once."

"Steve! Give me the message."

He held it out with a curious smile.

"Strictly speaking," he said, "I had no right to open it."

"No right?"

"I mean that it's addressed to Ben."

THE END

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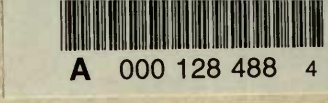
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